MARIFLOR

CONCHA ESPINA

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MARIFLOR

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
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MACMILLAN & CO., LIMITED
LONDON · BOMBAY · CALCUTTA
MELBOURNE

THE MACMILLAN CO. OF CANADA, LTD.
TORONTO

MARIFLOR

BY

CONCHA ESPINA de Serna

FROM THE SPANISH

"LA ESFINGE MARAGATA"

AUTHORIZED TRANSLATION BY

FRANCES DOUGLAS

NEW YORK

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1924

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Set up and electrotyped.
Published February, 1924.

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Printed in the United States of America by
THE FERRIS PRINTING COMPANY, NEW YORK.

FOREWORD

HAIL, MARAGATA!

The poet in this vivid picture by Concha Espina, coming as a stranger to Valdecruces, rode straight to the first woman he saw, who was drawing water from the fountain, like some maiden of ancient Arabia, and hurled at her the astonishing salutation: "Hail, Maragata!" Had she been a product of the modernized world she probably would have smiled back and answered tartly: "Hello, Don Quixote!" Being a Maragatan, however, she fled in dismay, and nearly convinced her family that a lunatic had come to town. In time, but not in spirit, she was of this present age, for in her, and in all the women of her bleak steppe in north central Spain, lay the guardianship of something that scarcely anywhere else in the world would be deemed worth while. It is because of these women that an unmixed racial type endures. The men of the clan live as nomads, transporting freight through those parts of the peninsula that lack the facilities of railroads. They would have been absorbed long ago into the changing populations through which they have wandered for countless generations, had it not been for these patient, toiling, devoted women. It is they who have kept the fires burning on the hearth for the annual home-coming of their itinerant husbands.

The story of the Maragatan Sphinx is laid among the rude remnants of one of the most ancient tribes on earth. But before the Phœnicians had exploited the metallic treasures that later enriched the coffers of King Solomon, and which still later formed the basis for Rome's most opulent colony, the progenitors of this indigenous people lived in the wild plains about Astorga. They descend from the first-known inhabitants of Spain, antedating the far-off invasion of the Celts. Crude as were the barbarous Celtic tribes, they nevertheless possessed advantages over the earlier race whom they supplanted. They took possession of the richer lands in the valleys, yielding some luxuries resulting from agricultural abundance, while the native, though merging slowly with the invaders, was driven back to the harsher uplands and to poverty. Poverty, therefore, has been the inheritance of these Spanish Celtiberians through all the millenniums since. The racial urge, or the racial devotion, whichever it may be called, and which, in either case, is the spirit of conservatism in them, has been maintained by the women as the crystallized, unvitalizing essence of the primordial tribal characteristics.

It is worth while at times to turn from modern life, with its conflict of emotions, and its uncertain drift and its undecipherable problems, to a people devoid of problems, to whom life is but the observance of fixed ideals, with poverty, work, and duty as the only recognized trinity. Here in the land of the Maragatos the way from the cradle to the grave is established like the unvarying course of a river.

There can be no divergence. To the Maragatan there is but one phrase of inspiration, lusterless, unilluminating—"Plod on!"

Imagine the consternation in such a community when one daughter of the tribe ventures to look for other inspirations, dares to aspire beyond the dull clods and cruel homes of Valdecruces! Conceive Psyche flung into an iron cage, companioned by dull-growling brutes that never look aloft! Then, when the door of the cage is opened for a moment and Psyche is bidden to freedom, shall she flee from the ancient order of her people, while she hears the tribal voice growling "duty"? When even the Church pronounces the same word, filling it with sacrificial meanings, what is left but to utter the age-old cry, *de profundis?*

Through tears that cannot moisten the hard and stony soil of the Maragatos shines ever the brightness of this soul of haunting beauty. Mariflor carries with her the spirit of redemption, and in the end there is redemption, but no miracle to achieve it. Concha Espina does no violence to fact; she does not permit sentiment to overweigh reason. It is this clear vision of truth, coupled with her masterly reproduction of a rigid tribal relic, almost forgotten amid the surge of that modern development which is so rapidly transforming Spain, that won for this novel the highest prize in the gift of the Spanish Academy. It is a book like a monument set in a plain—once looked upon the memory of it remains ineradicable.

COURTENAY DE KALB.

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CHAPTER I

THE BEAUTY SLEEP

THE strident blast of an engine blowing off steam rends the air, vigorous footsteps reverberate along the platform, a whistle shrieks, a bell rings, and the train starts, puffs, then rushes away, leaving the little station silent and deserted, with the single eye of its vigilant lantern glowing in the grim darkness of the night.

The only traveler to get on at San Pedro de Oza is young, agile, handsome. He carries a second-class ticket for Madrid, and, after springing up the steps and bustling into the car, promptly adjusts his hand baggage, a valise and a portmanteau, on the rack. He unfastens the shoulder belt he wears under his overcoat and places it carefully in a corner. In his traveling pouch, Rogelio Terán—for such is the young man's name—carries his entire fortune, the manuscript of a novel; a book of memoirs illustrated with the sketches of a wandering artist; some verses, post cards, and pictures.

Two women are in the compartment. In the dim light diffused by the little lamp on the ceiling it is only possible to make out that both are sleeping: one of them, sitting erect in a corner, wrapped in a scarf that completely covers her face; the other, stretched in a restful attitude beneath the comfort-

ing caress of a shawl. They are both unconscious of the arrival of the new traveler; both are resting with an equal degree of repose, and their bodies sway with the car, hazily outlined in the feeble light of the tiny place, as unconscious of the mechanical movement of the train as the inanimate contours of the vacant cushions, or the lifeless pieces of hand luggage.

The gentleman whiles away a few moments changing his soft hat for a cap, winding a rug about his knees, and, with much deliberation and care, changing his eyeglasses. Then he prepares a cigarette, places it between his lips with that habitual petulance of the smoker, and lights a match.

But before applying the light to his tobacco he bends inquiringly toward the lady sleeping opposite, whose candid profile, framed by dark curls, resting on the pillow, seemingly pleases him. Next he searches with more audacious determination the untroubled countenance that sleeps and smiles. The flickering flame of the match burns his fingers and yet the artist traveler does not cease to gaze and to admire. He notes the complexion, a light brown of softest hue; the countenance, pure and attractive; the eyelids, large and smooth; the lashes, a double curly fringe which, with their light shadow, accentuate the romantic blue of the circles around the eyes; her cheeks, plump and rosy; the nose straight and the lips red, while over her forehead waves of dark hair, loosened from the comb, fall over the eyebrows, forming a nimbus around the face like a heavy crown.

These are the marvels revealed in the flickering

light before it became extinguished by a breath, resembling a sigh, while the indolent observer is pronouncing to himself: "Admirable! Admirable!" He leans back in his seat scrutinizing the other unknown woman with a greedy stare. Of no avail! The mantilla or toca which conceals her face, does not offer the faintest hint to satisfy the audacity of the furtive and gallant explorer. He decides to light his forgotten cigarette, and smokes with impatient and nervous solicitude, his eyes and his heart intent on the sweet mystery of that beautiful woman.

The mail train left La Coruña at nine o'clock at night. Even though these ladies might have come from the capital, how did it happen that at half-past ten they have already succumbed so completely to the heaviness of sleep? They convey the impression of having traveled from some distant land, of being overcome by the weariness of many hours of wakefulness. Are they traveling together? Have they been brought together by chance? Where are they going? Who are they?

"Mother and daughter," suspects the inquisitive youth, realizing that it would not be well for so handsome a young girl to travel about the world alone. With keen enjoyment he delights in the emotion produced by suddenly finding himself, in his restless pilgrimage, in a quiet corner, beside a beautiful girl whom he had never seen before, and who, in the placidity of absolute confidence, is being rolled along with him over the dark roadway.

The voluptuous impression of this thought again inclines the traveler toward the young girl.

"Single? Married?" he queries mentally. "Single," he concludes, divining in her gentle features the purity of virginity combined with the charm of early youth. "She looks like a child!"

His study of her is made at such close range, it becomes so impulsive and profound, and in his blue dominating eyes it glows with such voracious desire that the girl becomes conscious of it, with vexation, in her sleep; she sighs, she grows impatient, she seems to struggle against the impossibility of waking, and, in a stifled voice, with a mixture of annoyance and tenderness, protests:

"Go away!"

A rapid movement sweeps up and down the length of the comfortable shawl, and instantly she who had been so subtly importuned becomes calm again. The fleeting, childish pout, which had for an instant changed her expression, disappeared from her face, and the smile overspread it now more clearly, more sweetly, while the intrepid admirer, leaning back in his seat, listens confusedly to the voice of gentlemanly conscience, that reprover of inconsiderate appetites, and even to the discreet advice of the adage which says:

"A kiss taken by surprise
Proves the rifler far from wise."

But these salutary warnings to prudence and honesty evidently do not penetrate deeply into the spirit of the traveler, who becomes absorbed in other unexpected revelations.

The sleeping girl, on tossing her arrogant head in

her annoyance, has released a string of red corals that roll loosely down about her neck.

The third time that Rogelio Terán bends forward to revel in the charm of this young woman he receives a startling and gloomy impression: a red line suddenly appears on the delicate brown of her flesh like the bleeding edge of a wound; her face, as she shifts her position, stands out more pale in the dim light, with the aureole of brown hair in rebellious and fascinating disorder. Her appearance has changed so suddenly that the astounded youth scarcely feels her to be the same as before. She now possesses a tragic beauty, the harassed countenance of a victim; the impression given is that she is surrounded by a shadow of some fatal predestination.

Again, at close range, but with respect and solicitude, the nearsighted light-blue eyes scan the feminine profile, and only then do the gentle respiration and the fleeting smile bring back tranquillity to the gentleman's mind.

A white flash has appeared from out the shadow in the corner where the girl's feet are resting, and the artist, triumphant in the open field of his explorations, discovers in an immaculate stocking, embroidered and elegant, encircling a high instep above the curve of a low, buckled shoe, new reasons for amazement and thought: that necklace, that shoe, do they belong to a dancing girl traveling in her stage costume, or to a lady dressed as a peasant girl through caprice and by way of extravagance?

The first supposition seems the more probable; perhaps under her dark wool serge cloak a lightning

flash of artificial stones sparkles amid the airy tulle of a gown worn by a wandering actress. At all events, this woman is not, certainly, an authentic peasant traveling in the costume peculiar to Galicia. A certain genteel perfume emanating from her garments, the delicacy of her face, the dainty, curving foot, the mellow and slightly-rounded throat, produce the impression of nobler quality.

Happy in this certainty, the gentleman decides to guard, jealously, the trustful repose of the lady. Looking at her in such profound tranquillity, he remembers having read, he does not know where, that only in the puissant period of youth does one sleep thus, with absolute abandon, with sweetness and with heaviness, and that this early rest before twelve o'clock at night, because it so restores and beautifies, a certain famous actress designated *the beauty sleep.*

The subtle curiosity of the artist being aroused by this recollection, penetrates the shadows, endeavoring to discover by what means the charm of that narcotic restorer lends to the muscles soothing lassitude, and, with an invisible brush stroke, spreads over the reposeful features exquisite serenity of beauty.

"The beauty sleep!" meditates the traveler, immersed in the poetic suggestion of the phrase. Suddenly his reverie is broken by the brusque opening of a little door, the uniform of the conductor, and a few imperative words with a suggestion of courtesy: "Good evening—the tickets?"

Rogelio searches for his without taking his eyes off the opposite sofa, and is amazed to see how the protecting traveling rug, shaken by a sluggish move-

ment, stiffens, slips off, and reveals a wonderful costume, beneath the black silk jacket of which is a handsome bust, while an unsteady voice, soft and musical, exclaims: "Grandmother, the tickets!"

The beautiful arm of the young girl reaches toward the woman concealed in the corner, shakes her, awakens her gently, and assists her to disencumber herself of clothing and wraps.

An aged face and a wrinkled hand emerge. The conductor punches the tickets, and goes out with a loud slam of the door.

The three travelers look at each other with close attention, with vague astonishment on the part of the two ladies, and with increasing interest on the part of Terán, whose imagination is strongly piqued by these two, so different, decked in the same peculiar finery, united by close ties of relationship, perhaps urged on by destiny to a common fate. Yet they represent two castes, two epochs, two civilizations. It needs but a moment for the quick mind of the novelist to surprise, separate, and define. The grandmother is a rude country-woman, a slave of the soil; she has the dull, submissive manner, the stolid expression, and in her sun-browned skin the furrows and traces of labor and of sorrow; one might fancy that she is bound in captivity, that feudal shackles oppress and torture her, that she has stepped from out the past, from the age of unquestioning servitude; while the girl, graceful and elegant, bespeaks independence and arrogance; even in her bizarre costume her entire appearance reveals the modern stamp of charm and culture. On the young girl the peasant dress seems a capricious disguise, while

on the old woman it possesses an air of rudeness and humility, as if it were the livery of bondage.

Scrutinizing as with a single glance these two individuals, the delicate and swift perception of the artist promptly realizes that those eyes, so suddenly opened opposite him, are looking at him without seeing him. The old woman seemed dazed, as if her mind were bound within the confines of some remote comprehension, from which only with extreme difficulty could she extract a hazy idea; while in the pupils of the young girl the soul had as yet hardly awakened. A strange restlessness took possession of the artist while he awaited the return of that absent spirit which brightens and glows; bespeaks its lineage; that reveals some cherished secret of the inner realm whence it springs, and where it dreams. The eagerness with which Rogelio invoked the sleeping essence of that being became so intense that at last it responded, awoke, and looked out from the light-brown eyes, without comprehending the reasons for such a strange demand.

"Sleep! Sleep a little longer!" murmured the old woman, seeing the girl turn over indolently with her fingers in her tousled curls.

"Yes, I am very sleepy—I am cold!"

"I will cover you with the rug."

The grandmother, with deep solicitude, moved her coarse hands to cover the girl, who had reclined again in the seat.

Her two rows of eyelashes met, she gave a deep sigh, and became quiet, drawing the edge of the rug around her face as if to shield it from the voracious glances of the artist; the sleeping soul did not

awaken in her drowsy pupils with perfect lucidity. If, at the imperious demand of another spirit, it peeped forth for a moment, it soon sank back again from the mysterious border into the realm of rest, into the profound beauty sleep.

Thus the night wore on, majestic and gloomy. Rogelio Terán, vexed by a swarm of thoughts, searched the landscape through the frost-coated windows: the trees and the hills, the depressions and the heights, seemed to flee like a gallop of black shadows along the border of the track; the distant stars trembled with bright effulgence in an inclement sky, bleak and glacial.

The artist fell into a reverie and began to recall the various times he had been impressed, as now, by the beauty of a woman; and searching the memories of his life he discovered in the background of each gallant recollection a keen and tender pity, an ardent sense of commiseration for the beauties worshipped by him for a moment, for a few hours, perhaps, from the window of a moving train, in a softly cushioned carriage, on the deck of a ship, while swaying to the rhythm of a dance, or while listening to the mystic strains of an organ. It was possible to love a woman under so many different circumstances!

He had loved them all with the soul of a poet, and in each of them he had sought the shadow of a mystery, the halo of a sacrifice, the trace of an affliction. Being the son of an unhappy creature whom he had seen weep many a time, and die in the flower of her youth with a smile upon her lips, he was obsessed with the idea of feminine sorrows, as

if the tremor of those beloved tears forever throbbed in his veins. Very sensitive because of this, very human, he was fired with love which he lavished with infinite tenderness both upon women and upon beautiful and humble things. Believing he could discern an attribute of suffering surrounding every beautiful woman, whenever he chanced to meet one, he was overcome by a deep melancholy.

He played at love timidly, in uncertain adventures, seeking and fleeing with sacred terror the great and definitive passion of youth, the root of life, strong and deep, that rises from earth to heaven like a flame, like a cry, like a crown. He desired to sweep on from passion to passion, loving everything with impetuousness, and with many compassionate regrets clinging to the memory of that maternal smile which ripened in the welcome repose of death, but without enslaving himself to the beating of one single heart, for to love the entire world seemed to him a beautiful triumph of sentiment and of kindness, while to hurl himself into the abyss of a solitary love, to bind himself to one woman, would mean to stifle his soul at its very root, which might either rise to heaven as a victorious crown, a piercing cry, or a fatal flame.

This overpowering terror at the brink of the great passions was not apart from egoism and lack of decision. A dilettante in matters of love, Terán tried to glorify his existence with strokes of chivalry, according to modern style, without soiling his genteel hands, without disturbing his gallant attitude, nor yet enchaining his inconstant heart. A sense of propriety and of curiosity, competing in the

fickle disposition of this man, disputed for mastery over his faculties, under the prudent shield of an even temper and in obedience to the spirit of the artist and epicure. In such complex sentimental baggage there was not a single note of knavery toward others or against himself, but there were many verses consecrated by tenderness written on the margin of each love chapter, which shows that the roving poet was more of an hidalgo than a curiosity monger, more compassionate than sensual, and more artistic than worldly, though possessed of a great thirst for novelties, sensations, and adventures.

While the train rushed on through the darkness of the night, Rogelio Terán aroused his memory to romantic retrospection of his shattered illusions, and he frequently turned his eyes in the direction of the sleeping girl, who, lying motionless on the cushions, presented the rigidity of a statue.

The artist imagined he had not for a moment ceased to contemplate the immobile profile, when the girl awoke and looked at her watch. It was three o'clock in the morning and the train had stopped in front of a sign which said: "San Clodio." Here the artist arose to his feet, threw off his weariness for a moment, and standing outside the door, in imagination reverently greeted the wandering author of the "Sonatas," the poet of "Flor de Santidad," whose gallant and rural muse had inspired delightful pages in these sylvan solitudes.

When the train started, panting and snorting, Terán, overcome by sleep, sank back upon the cushioned seat, annoyed at being so uncomfortable.

He put away his glasses, pulled his cap down over his eyes, and, taking refuge in a corner, endeavored to forget his neighbor and to fall asleep, while the old woman disappeared from view again beneath the cloud of her shawls.

CHAPTER II

MARIFLOR

THE glorious light of dawn had begun to flood the landscape, driving the shadows back into the distant coves of the mountains, when Rogelio felt an acute attraction that stimulated and aroused him, forcibly calling him, half awake and half asleep, back to reality from the unexplored realm of dreams. He sat erect at once, correcting his careless posture, and fixed his beclouded mind on the opposite seat, murmuring with some trepidation: "Good morning."

The lady responded to his matutinal greeting, and then, pensively, she asked herself where she had heard a voice like that before; when she had traveled, as now, with an aristocratic young man with blond hair and blue eyes, who looked at her so steadily.

"Never," she replied to herself mentally: "I have dreamed it!"

Upon recalling that she had awakened a few moments before opposite the sleeping man, she vacillated between the hazy idea of having seen him come in, or of having dreamed that he did so. A strange restlessness took possession of her; all the carmine tint in her blood gathered beneath the tense skin of her cheeks; her eyes turned toward her grand-

mother who was still asleep, and then, to conceal her perturbation, she tried to lower one of the windows.

Terán sprang to her assistance, regretful at having abandoned himself in the presence of this young beauty to a posture perhaps ridiculous. She feigned much interest in the indistinct horizon which was beginning to become more clearly outlined in the dreamy glow on the distant curve of the clouds. He, in the meantime, was solicitously examining the dress she wore, which belonged to a region unfamiliar to him; nor did he fail to study her youthful figure where beauty reposed, as in some famous amphora.

The girl wore the garb customary in various parts of Spain: a skirt of black cloth with embroidery along the edge, opened at the back over a red petticoat, and over the waist a dark scarf trimmed with velvet; a silk apron with dainty decorations, bright flowers, birds, picturesque appliqué work, and two ribbons embroidered with mottoes, and having tassels at their ends; on the bust, beneath a string of coral, was a yellow silk handkerchief, also decorated with handsome designs.

Above this extraordinary display of glossy silks and brilliant colors, to Terán's delight, fluttered two beautiful hands, like frightened doves. They seemed eager to arrange stray curls, to adjust hairpins, to clear her forehead of the intrusion of the intractable hair which had rebelled during the hazards of the night; but they did not accomplish any of these purposes, and, shaking with cold, they endeavored to close the window again. Terán intervened once

more with gallant haste, and after a few phrases of gratitude and courtesy the two young people sat opposite each other, chatting and smiling with the frank expression proper to their propinquity and to their years; she, more given to making replies than to asking questions, told him she was bound for Astorga with her grandmother to live in the country until the return of her father who had gone to the Argentine.

"Then you are a Maragatan?"

"Yes."

She told him that she had been born down there in Valdecruces, a silent corner in the region inhabited by the clan of the Maragatos, but that she did not remember the country. When very small she had been taken to La Coruña, and had never returned to her native pueblo, because her mother did not like it very well. Her mother was a native of the coast, of a beach town in Galicia, Bayona, the most beautiful garden spot in the world. The childish expression of her blue eyes expanded with the placid signs of a fleeting recollection.

"I have not been back there, either, since my mother died," she murmured. "Everything has gone against me since her death," she added. "In losing her I lost my joy, my fortune, and even the sea and the land I love; even my manner of dressing, and the name I used to have."

"Why, how can that be? Really?" inquired the poet, charmed by the plaintive voice that rang with a note resembling broken crystal, barely audible above the noise of the train.

"Yes, truly; my father lost his interests in less

than a year, after having long lived in luxury, and he took ship a poor man, dreaming of earning money for me, by sending me away from my beloved coast, from my fields, from my joys."

"And from one you love?" boldly asked the young man.

"From everything I love," she said with a careless smile. After that she replied amiably to many things which her questioner wished to know.

Yes, her name had been changed. Her name was Florinda, but her grandmother said that in the land of the Maragatos fine names were not in use; that they usually call the women "Marijuana," "Maripepa," "Marirosa," and that she must be known in future as Mariflor.

"Delicious!" interrupted Terán.

Florinda was wearing the costume of the Maragatos, because the dress of the region is as sacred there as a religious rite, but she would not be compelled to suffer the life of the rustic tillers of the soil in all its rudeness; she had heard that it was very trying! Her father had found a means to shield her from that atrocious slavery until he should be able to take her away with him again and assure her independence.

"By means of a marriage?" insinuated Terán, with vague regret, a mixture of envy and compassion, not realizing that he was venturing, very hastily, to penetrate into her personal affairs.

She attributed no importance to the question and replied with sincerity:

"Perhaps by getting married I might be very happy, as was my mother, who had freedom, and

was greatly indulged; but men like my father are very rare."

Florinda grew meditative; her eyes, shaded by their long lashes, assumed a dreamy expression as she endeavored to picture to herself her future.

Terán gazed at her, deeply touched at this sweet ingenuousness which seemed not to suspect evil, nor to take offense at the extraordinary questioning; this was the intimate exchange of confidence which, ambitious and fevered, he had stimulated a few hours before in those beautiful eyes overshadowed with sleep; it seemed as if the emotions could be seen to pass beneath the girl's delicate skin, as if the heart-throbbing of her life could be felt, and the harmonious rhythm of her spirit could be heard, as if Mariflor's whole self became converted into a soul of crystal which vibrated in a gentle voice and became suffused in a tenuous smile.

The flame of compassion burning in the heart of the poet suddenly flared up in his audacious mind, filling his manly conscience with pity; deeply pained, Terán experienced a presentiment of the unhappy fate of this woman who, from a soft and easy existence, suddenly found herself hurled, innocent and poor, into the harshest and most desolate part of the wild uplands of León, into the poverty-stricken and destitute land that he remembered having crossed once on a hasty trip to the heights of Teleno, of whose frowning image he retained a tragic impression.

It was early in the spring, as now. Several members of the Spanish Alpine Club had crossed the Maragatan region at the slow, steady pace of the

saddle animals, like wandering ghosts of worldly pleasure roving aimlessly through the desert wastes of life. They were a party of gay young adventurers, light-hearted explorers of the wild sierras, who had never before been caught in so forlorn and sterile a plain, merely dotted with primitive, poverty-stricken pueblos; a harsh and unproductive expanse, where the blood of the Castilian soil, the brilliant poppy, expends its efforts, like a flux from infertile organs. Melancholy overcame the travelers for a few moments, silencing them, while making the trip from the Roman bridge over the Gerga to the exit at Astorga and on to Boisán, where Nature again gains courage and bedecks herself with a rare display of beauty on the ascent to Teleno. Taking the "route of the pilgrims," Murias de Rechivaldo, Castrillo de los Polvazares, and other towns with sonorous names and dead appearance stood out on the heath like sphinxes, along the medieval bridle paths; and at the tragic threshold of these silent pueblos arose as a symbol of neglect and desolation the sorrowful figure of the Maragatan woman in harsh familiarity with toil, struggling stoically against the niggard response of the soil.

In the sudden flash of this recollection, Rogelio Terán recognized the dress and the type of the sleeping woman; she was the same that the young man had seen on those grim plains of the Maragatos, hardened, saddened women, sacrificed in the days of their youth, inexorably bound to the soil like an heraldic attribute of slavery. But the girl who was smiling and meditating in the other end of the compartment seemed to be removed by centuries of generosity and

sweetness from her grandmother; on the body and in the soul of this genteel girl love had placed the sign of a pardon, with all its train of gentle graces.

Again the artist fixed his attention upon her, and, in order to conceal a mad tumult of thoughts, and for the sake of saying something, he resumed:

"Your costume is charming!"

"This is the dress of gala occasions," replied Florinda, gracefully shaking the heavy fringe of her kerchief; "my father sent for it so that I might have my picture taken in it, and grandmother had me put it on to-day, because she says that in this way I won't seem so great a stranger in the pueblo. I will have to make myself a more humble one for every-day use. The thing that I can't endure is to wear a kerchief over my head as grandmother does; have you noticed it?"

"For my part, I agree with you; I wish to see nothing but the splendid hair of my friend Mariflor —Mariflor what?"

"Salvadores. In Valdecruces nearly all the families have that name."

"Then no doubt they must all be related."

"Yes; they marry one another, as a general thing."

"Very likely they have some young cousin picked out for you."

"So they say."

"And his name?" Terán insinuated with persistence.

"Antonio Salvadores. But——"

This *but*, long drawn out and spoken with a smile,

accompanied by a delicious pout, caused the space between the poet's eyebrows to unwrinkle.

"But what?" he pressed.

"We only know each other through our photographs."

"And by an exchange of letters?"

"No indeed! The Maragatan sweethearts don't write to each other."

"So you are sweethearts now, in fact?"

"According to the custom of the country. Antonio's father and mine were brothers and they desired this marriage, but they leave me at liberty to decide for myself. And if I don't like the lad——"

"What does he look like?"

"According to his picture and by what they tell me, he is stocky, swarthy, with auburn hair——"

"He doesn't look in the least like me," interrupted Terán with ingenuous regret.

"Why should he look like you?" asked the girl. And her smile, feigning surprise, displayed a thoroughly feminine trace of curiosity. Then, in a tone of confidence, her suspicion aroused lest the sleep of the old woman might be less deep than it seemed, she added:

"My cousin keeps a store in Valladolid; this year he will come to Valdecruces for the sacramental feast, and I am only waiting to see him in order to say that we are not suited to each other, and to free myself from this bond."

"But if you have already given your consent?"

"What have I to do with that?" the young girl exclaimed with intense annoyance. Then she low-

ered her voice, and the gentleman was obliged to incline his ear toward her sweet lips as she whispered:

"Among the Maragatos, the marriage is arranged between the nearest relatives of the two, without counting in the least upon the young people themselves. Nevertheless, there are a few exceptions to this custom, although they are rare; my father fell in love with a lady from the coast, and he was very happy with her. For that reason he does not insist upon my marrying my cousin and he has requested only that I meet him before making other ties."

"But if you should come to care for him?" persisted the artist, with unconcealed interest.

"A shopkeeper does not fulfill my ideal."

Deeply respectful toward the cherished ideal of this charming child, the poet questioned eagerly:

"What profession do you prefer in a man?"

With both hands she brushed the dark curls off her forehead, and replied earnestly:

"That of a sailor."

After this confession she fell into so deep a reverie it seemed as if Florinda's soul sped away to remote seas in quest of the romantic silhouette of some venturesome man of the waves. But soon she seemed to return from her sudden flight and she drew together two subtle ends of a very slender hope by a question which brought a flush to her cheeks:

"Have you ever followed any profession?"

His heart softened by her fascinating blushes, Terán replied:

"I have followed all of them, and none of them in particular, for I am a poet, a novelist. I forge

creatures and sentiments, lives and professions; I create souls, roads, lands and seas, worlds and skies, planets and clouds. Beneath the exaltation of my pen, obedient to my will, arise people and things, the past and the future, the finite and the infinite; the good, the bad, beauty, art, virtue, sorrow——"

This torrent of lyric eloquence was cut short by a strange cry from Mariflor. She had been listening to the discourse with eyes moist and feverish, overpowered by the vehemence of his ardent phrases. Suddenly a barb of light struck her full in the face and her heart gave a bound which compelled her to leap to her feet, with amazement depicted on her face, and on her lips and in her eyes an expression of ecstasy at the wonderful spectacle presented by the plain.

The train had passed the frightful precipice which divides the Galician lands from the Leonese, the gloomy and sonorous bed of the auriferous river, the craggy, broken ground along the frontier, the bridges and tunnels of La Barosa and Paradela; it was chugging its way through the broad basin of the Sil, which was concealed in the distance by a fantastic sea of frozen mist, against which the sharp rays of the rising sun became broken. The sun struggled to wound and rend the compressed waves of mist which resisted the onslaught of the impassioned king, warding off his barbs of light with impalpable tufts of vapor. Suddenly the luminous yellow globe appeared, lifting his forehead above the glistening misty sea, and hurling a triumphant flame above its waves; then came a favorable and vigorous breeze which stirred the mist

into a swiftly moving whirlwind, rent it into shreds, and dragged these in wild fury beneath the glory of the sun, like a succession of waves of subtle waters with foaming crests crowned by a nimbus of purple and gold, weird and strange as an aurora borealis. But when the wind began to subside, the mist rose again in rebellion; it ascended, leaving stray bits of fleece on the meadows of the Sil; there came a moment when, on a level with the train, which was climbing a steep grade, the mist managed to reach the sovereign disk and shut off its light, but the rays of the flaming sun, becoming ever more powerful and penetrating, darted swiftly across the land and the sky, until they caught between two flames the floating enemy, who, surrounded, shrinking, writhing like the convulsive arm of a wounded titan, endeavored to cleave the sun into two glittering hemispheres. It was a spectacle of wondrous and austere grandeur, a sidereal vision, a dawn like one of those during the early days of creation. It seemed as if two twin suns, two igneous meteors, two rival planets, were glowing between earth and sky, soon to crash one against the other and to convert the world into a chaos of fire and vapor. It lasted but an instant, a brief and fleeting moment; for all the dense expanse of conquered mist, pursued, attacked, now in the sky, now on the mountain, above the waters and the treetops, disappeared, flake by flake, pulverized and absorbed by the wind and by the sun.

CHAPTER III

TWO ROADS

THE poet and Mariflor, overcome by a vision so extraordinary and at the same time so natural, again began to exchange glances and confidences, but both felt burning in their eyes and in their words the divine glow of the tremendous conflagration of the dawn they had witnessed, as if, like the earth and the sky, their hearts had also become inflamed.

Rogelio Terán, instead of returning to his seat, placed himself beside Florinda, and he bent toward her solicitously, pouring a flood of words into her ears. She, somewhat alarmed, glanced around the car, which was glowing with gilded sunshine, although it was cold, and encountered the eyes of her grandmother, who, motionless, sorrowful, seemed not to feel the slightest curiosity over the insuperable pomp of the morning nor over the gallant manner of the gentlemanly intruder.

Following the indication of the girl's smile Terán attempted, in his turn, to win a pleasant response; but his endeavor produced no result upon that impassive creature, all furrowed, over-clouded and dismal, like the twilight of a race.

Mariflor graciously intervened between the good

will of the artist and the dullness of the old woman, explaining with much gentility:

"Grandmother, this gentlemen has become a friend of mine; he has traveled with us all night."

But the old Maragatan woman failed to comprehend her eloquent arguments, nor did they convince her, for, after a murmur, half words and half sighs, she continued mute and passive, as if she did not care a doit for the newly found friend. He asked the girl in a low voice:

"Is she deaf?"

"She is depressed," she whispered in explanation, trembling as if the grazing of a pair of wings of evil portent had caused her to shudder.

The roseate sun, which illuminated the car without warming it, reflected two glistening tears in the honey-colored eyes of the old woman; and the silence which for a moment followed the plaintive voice weighed so heavily, that the progress of the train, noisy and swift, seemed a tragic flight across the desolate plain.

Rogelio Terán, his admiration for Florinda ever increasing, wished to prove the kindliness of his intent at making friends with the old woman, and win the gratitude of the girl.

At last the young man's curiosity was rewarded; by virtue of the frank eloquence of Mariflor, and aided by that key to the sentiments of which poets understand the use, he had read the truth concerning those two souls, one filled with suspicion and dread and hermetically sealed, the other open and trustful in the fullness of expectancy and of dreams. With the generous desire of repaying in hidalgic

coin that surprising revelation, the artist, devoted and eager, bent again toward the Maragatan girl, and told her his history, his ambitions, his travels, and his adventures; he spoke with cogency, with eagerness, glancing frequently at his watch, observing anxiously the landmarks along the railroad track, making the most of the fleeting moment which would never return, realizing that each blind forward lurch of the train hastened the dark hour of separation from this rare new life so full of suggestion for the poet.

Mariflor listened to the fervent tale, credulous and amazed, her eyes blinded by faith and her heartbeats accelerated by surprise. This exquisite blond-haired gentleman, so charming and so eloquent, whose strange and irresistible glance penetrated to the depths of her soul; who wrote books and contributed to periodicals; who knew the dangers and the quicksands of the land and of the sea, the joys and the sorrows of life, wished to be the friend of Mariflor; wished to write her letters, make verses in her honor, go to Valdecruces—*Válgame Dios*, to what wonderful things the child was listening and replying, she knew not how!

In the quiet corner of the car a multitude of promises and requests had been exchanged, a flood of confessions and of plans; the fount of emotion had overflowed, warm and bubbling, into the flowery field of two young souls, and the murmur of the foaming waters rang at one and the same time with the sorrowful tones of an elegy, and with the joyous modulations of an epithalamium.

In the midst of this ardent haste to know and to

tell; in this confused outburst of sentiments and of words, the grim figure of the grandmother suddenly arose, asking Mariflor timidly:

"Are you hungry?"

"Hungry?"

The girl was slow in translating to reality this matter-of-fact suggestion which had shaken the lethargy of the old woman, and after a smile and an effort, she replied with flushed cheeks:

"No, grandmother."

But the old Maragatan woman said, not without difficulty, abashed by the presence of the gentleman, that it would be better to breakfast before reaching Astorga, in order to start from there at once on the journey to Valdecruces.

"Is it very far?" queried the poet, desirous of starting conversation with the old woman.

Utterly indifferent to the stranger's interest in their affairs, she examined her luggage in search of some desired object; and Florinda answered, disturbed once more by the vision of the mysterious future:

"It is very far. At the gait the mules travel we will not arrive till sunset."

The sorrowful inflection of her voice brought to the mind of the artist, with heart-rending pity, the vision of a wretched caravan winding its way slowly, in the gray solitude, across the bleak heath.

The silent, little old grandmother had extricated from several crudely wrapped bundles and parcels some viands which she offered with traditional courtesy to the gentleman; and then he arose with diligence to search in his luggage for other gifts.

They proved to be delicate foods, dainty cold meats in diminutive portions, sweets wrapped in shiny papers; and a bottle with a screw top from which he poured coffee into a cup, offering it to the elder woman.

"It's hot, grandmother; drink a little," urged Mariflor.

"Hot?" she replied in amazement, glancing suspiciously at the steam given off by the comforting drink. "But who has heated it?"

"It keeps that way in the flask, which is called a thermos bottle; didn't you know about them?"

The old woman shook her head with incredulity, and gingerly accepted the cup.

"Bembibre!" exclaimed the girl, reading the name of the station as the train stopped.

Both the young people, forgetting the grandmother and the breakfast, looked out of the window to see the luxuriant garden of El Vierzo, peaceful as an oasis, in the heart of the noble and austere ancestral home of the Leonese.

"A charming land of poetry and of legend, of love and piety!" exclaimed the artist almost under his breath, while thoughts and recollections ran riot in his imagination.

"That reminds me," murmured Florinda, "of a novel of this region I once read."

"Do you mean 'El Señor de Bembibre'?"

"Yes. It is a very sad and beautiful book, isn't it?"

"There is no such thing as beauty without sorrow," replied the youth, deeply touched, gazing at his friend sympathetically.

The train, which for some distance had been running between striking landmarks, hurled forward again to reveal planted fields and deep gorges, open plains and groves, marvels of landscapes and of vegetation flooded with light beneath a cobalt sky.

Florinda began to interweave emotions of her own with sorrowful memories of the beautiful and unfortunate Doña Beatrice de Ossorio and her fiancé, Don Alvaro Yáñez, who was as unhappy and disconsolate as she who had died for love of him, she who was at once maiden and wife in a belated hour of joy. The winding streams were soon left behind, with their chestnut and walnut trees, their vines and olives, shrubs and bushes transplanted from the south of Spain, which this privileged Leonese corner shelters and renders fruitful within view of its perpetual snows. Florinda seemed to hear ringing in her ears the hoofbeats of the fiery charger there where the Señor de Bembibre had borne the swooning Beatrice in his arms; she beheld the nuns, abbots, the Knights Templars, the Cistercian monks, and the banner of the cross floating from towers and turrets; all the imagery of passion, of courage, and of faith which historians and artists have associated with the hermitical region of El Vierzo shed its romantic perfume over the vivid imagination of the young traveler.

The same legendary and heroic atmosphere stimulated the nerves of Terán, while the current of his soul rushed on, tumultuous, unrestrained, and sorrowful, like the plaintive sighing of the wind on a night of storm. He realized that the landscape was reminiscent of the majestic strength of the

famous monasteries and the valiant castles, of the feudal mansions and the fortresslike abbeys. The poet's fantasy outspread its wings, it swept over drawbridges and fosses; mingled with pilgrims and friars, with penitent queens and hermit bishops; heard the chanting of the anachoretic psalms and the battle clamor of the contending lords; and beheld, for a moment, the virile Catholic renaissance of the region dominated by the monastic staff and by the Templars.

So, crossing a region so propitious to dreams and to love, those two fervid souls, stimulated by heroic memories and by tenderness, succumbed to the fascination of mingled thoughts.

Speeding along in the rushing train, El Vierzo, saturated with beauty and with memories as fleeting and intangible as dreams, slipped behind into the distance; and the old Maragatan woman, still holding the cup in her hand, glanced hesitatingly at her traveling companion after draining the last drop of coffee in furtive sips. A mixture of admiration and of suspicion, a faint glimmer of curiosity, overspread the dulled countenance of the old woman, upon whose quivering lips humbly trembled the initial words of a courteous phrase.

And so she remained in dull passivity, making a movement as if to return the cup to the hands of its owner, while he and Mariflor, closing the parenthesis of their fantasies with a mutually tender and penetrating glance, sat talking, in the light pouring through the windows, unconscious now of the landscape and of the world extending beyond the confines of their own hearts. At that moment

the conversation was trivial; they spoke in restless haste, eager to utilize the moments that still remained before their route should divide into two paths, but feeling the necessity of placing before themselves a discreet veil to conceal the ardor of this attraction, so recent yet so potent. Their words possessed not alone the significance of their meaning, but were fervent and vibrating, and dyed in the color and glow of hidden sentiment.

"Do you like novels?" asked Terán.

"I am very fond of reading novels and histories."

"I will send you some books."

"Books written by yourself?"

"Yes, and some better ones. What kind do you prefer?"

"Books of travel and adventure; it delights me to have a great many things happen in a book; I like tales of war, adventures on the sea, contests over property——"

"And love stories?"

"Yes, but they must end in a marriage," said Florinda, and she turned crimson.

"Ever since last night," murmured the poet, "I have been experiencing a beautiful adventure, a pilgrimage of love——. How is it destined to end?"

The glowing flame of their hearts warmed the cheeks of the girl and the accents of the man. The intermittent discourse, alluring and ardent, was stifled by the roar of the train. When it stopped at the station of Torre, again that new and imperative intimacy which caused confusion and

amazement even to the young couple themselves was interrupted.

Then the poor grandmother, still persevering in her courteous attitude, managed to finish her sentence and to hand over the cup.

"Thank you," she said in low tones, finally imparting life and direction to the phrase and to the movement for which she had so long been preparing.

Mariflor and her young gallant felt somewhat remorseful as they turned toward the deserted grandmother, and in proof of their contrition and in order to make amends, they took seats beside her.

The susceptible gentleman had not been as zealous to make friends with the old woman as to win the girl; and now, impatient, lamenting the pressure of time, drawn toward the old woman by a genuine impulse of cordiality, he would have been glad had he chanced to have in his possession some very valuable gift in order that he might offer it as a tribute of devotion.

Prodigal and conciliatory though he was by disposition, he found no gifts, nor even words, with which to pave the way to the unresponsive heart of the grandmother that only grudgingly gave evidence of its sensations.

The youth sat thoughful and silent, hesitatingly holding the aluminum cup between his fingers. Again the pleasant voice of Florinda came to the rescue, repeating like an echo her former words:

"Grandmother, this gentleman has become a friend of mine; he has traveled with us all night."

The youth smiled, and the old woman smiled also. Then, Mariflor, greatly pleased, rested an

arm tenderly on the shoulder of her grandmother, and continued:

"This gentleman is a poet; he makes books—writes them, do you understand?"

"Yes, yes," murmured the old woman, and her dull, mild eyes revealed a faint glow of admiration for the attractive youth.

"He is going to send us some," promised Florinda insinuatingly, "and I will read them to you, to entertain you a little. This gentleman," she continued, "travels about the world alone. He also has lost his mother, just as I have; his father also is in America."

"No doubt you are from León," respectfully ventured the grandmother, who could conceive of no more illustrious birthplace.

"I am from the province of Santander, señora; from Villanoble, on the seashore."

To the amazement of Florinda the grandmother started, and then exclaimed:

"Villanoble! I know that town; it has a very rich seminary, a great beach, very beautiful houses. How far away it is!"

The poet's face assumed an expression of sorrow, as if in response to the conjury of the strange exclamation the town so suddenly evoked had drawn farther away, becoming more remote, more unapproachable. The girl asked:

"But have you been there?"

"Yes."

"When, grandmother? I never heard that you had."

"It was a long time ago; before you were born;

a brother of your father, who was attending the seminary, fell sick in Villanoble; I was a widow by then, and the other men of the family were away, so it fell to me to go and bring him home."

"Was he the one who died of consumption?"

"Yes."

Overcome by the recollection, the old woman bowed her forehead, pale as ashes, and fell into such a gloomy attitude that both young people maintained a respectful silence, until the girl wishing to justify such grave sorrow explained:

"Grandmother has had thirteen children and only two are left."

"Poor thing!" sympathized Terán, who could divine a dark world of suffering in the soul of the unhappy creature.

A station, deserted and flooded with sunshine, lay outspread before the train; the door suddenly opened, and a pair of civil guards appeared in the vacant space. Irresolute, mysterious, the guards closed the door again without ascending the steps; they were the only travelers who had shown a disposition to accompany the poet and the Maragatan women during the entire journey.

Terán began to look over his time-table with somewhat alarming precipitation, and announced with regret:

"There are only two more stations before we reach Astorga!"

While consulting his time-table he had half opened his pouch, and from it he began to take post cards, notebooks, and diminutive volumes—all the bizarre collection made by a roving and in-

dustrious young man. Meanwhile, Mariflor, pressing her body against her grandmother, urged in wheedling tones:

"This friend is going to write to us; to come to see us; do you hear, grandmother? Shall he not?"

The friend laid a pile of post cards on the old woman's lap, saying:

"Do me the favor to accept these, señora, as a souvenir."

Surprised at this attention, she did not know what to reply, and she smiled, allowing herself to be won over like a child, by captivating phrases and puerile gifts. She seemed to experience a moment of happiness; her clumsy hands spread the cards out over her apron and the representations of a thousand treasures appeared: paintings and fabrics from Toledo, tapestries from the Escorial, the fountains of La Granja, Salamancan palaces, gems of Moorish architecture, wild bits of mountain scenery, exquisite Andalusian gardens—a tumult of art and of Spanish riches. The old Maragatan woman was especially attracted by two cards of Mexican origin printed in colors, reproductions of the Avenida de Juárez and of the palace of Hernán Cortés; she held them up, revealing preference and admiration, and then, overcome by confusion, ashamed, she lamented:

"What a pity; I know nothing of letters! I don't even know how to write!"

"But I do," said Mariflor soothingly, eager to accept the tokens.

"You take them if the gentleman insists," yielded the grandmother, "and thank him."

"If you come to Valdecruces, you know that you have there some one who is at your service."

"I shall go, most decidedly," replied the poet, dazzled by a glance from Florinda. In her tender, sparkling eyes glowed an expression of uncertainty mingled with mute interrogation.

When it came to say good-by to this unusual man, this new-found friend, the girl felt a strange dread of losing happiness, and at the same time a doubt of having found it.

The young poet, on his part, allowed himself to be absorbed in the emotion of the moment, without stopping to unravel mysteries, allowing his dreams to rush on, realizing that he would soon awaken.

The poor old woman, after having given way for a brief space to a senile flight of the imagination, again compressed her heart within the rigid walls of her cruel existence.

Steadily, mechanically, the train rushed on, unconscious of the anxieties of the three travelers, and Florinda was called upon to assist her grandmother in her preparations for their arrival. Over the clumsy bundles which constituted the rustic baggage, fluttered the delicate hands of the girl, gathering the coarse esparto baskets and hampers and the multitudinous packages wherein the old woman was carrying the meanest utensils left over from the breaking up of the home in La Coruña—such things as she had been unable to sell because they were too worn and shabby.

The little grandmother, in her anxiety over her bundles, counted them slowly and carefully—one,

two, three, touching each haversack or bag with the tip of her index finger; the girl sighed with weariness, as if she were overburdened by the weight of this wretched luggage, the revelation of merciless poverty.

Watching these preparations, Rogelio Terán shuddered with compassion. He was so absorbed in trying to decide whether to admire or to pity the rare beauty of the girl that he failed to realize that he was lending no aid in the rude work of lifting the hampers and bundles. When it occurred to him to make amends, Mariflor had finished her task, and she was putting on, in bandoleer style, over her bright, beflowered kerchief, an elegant pouch which, half open as it was, emitted a most delicate perfume.

"It is part of my gala costume," said the young lady, responding to the evident surprise of Terán; "of my peasant dress as a daughter of the region," she emphasized with a touching air of regret.

"With that on," replied the poet with enthusiasm, "you convey the impression that the blind god has offered his symbolic quiver to the queen of the Maragatos."

The grandmother, with a sudden unexpected and brusque movement, said prophetically:

"In our land there are no queens. All the women are slaves there."

Florinda turned her distressed countenance toward the window, and it occurred to her that the landscape seemed to be quivering in pain.

They drew into the station of Astorga. The vendors of the classic butter biscuits, an occasional humble display of the regional dress, and a sug-

gestion of mercantile traffic contributed a trace of character and life to the place.

In the midst of this ordinary and mediocre picture, Mariflor, with her unusual beauty and her luxurious costume, formed the outstanding feature. Following her grandmother, who stood surrounded by those possessions so suggestive of the muleteer, the girl sprang down to the platform, assisted by the hand which Terán tendered with tremulous solicitude. The colors of her costume and the sweetness of her face stood out so noticeably in the brilliant sunshine that a stir of curiosity was aroused in all the windows of the train and round about the entire station. Soon questioning amazement broke through the confines of mute contemplation, developing into compliments and words of admiration from the direction of the train, from the steps, and from the windows, where the anonymous condition of mere "traveler" frequently prompts men to much daring and to an excess of liberty.

The cloud of compliments seemed to envelop the slender Maragatan like an incense of worship; and the poet would have liked to crown the tribute with a resounding huzza, and to hurl the echoes of his audacity throughout the vast world.

But close beside Florinda, the triumphant and lauded beauty, stood another woman, old and broken, wearing an identical costume, destined to an identical fate, overwhelmed by trouble and apprehension, surrounded by her poverty-stricken luggage; and before Terán's mind loomed the desolate vision of the wild heath, where the traveler seems to find no end nor alleviation to the hardship of his

journey, as if life wanders in despair across its desert wastes; as if civilization stops abashed and hesitant at the threshold of the hostile region, whose inclement heart none but the heroic hands of women have succeeded in touching, in the hope of winning a difficult and belated reward.

When, with murmured phrases, the poet said farewell to his friend, the arrogant words prompted by gallantry were burned away by the flames of compassion; a bell and a whistle summoned him back to the departing train, while Mariflor smiled with the docile immobility of a beaming portrait.

The blue eyes, which no longer reflected the ideal figure of the Maragatan, turned longingly toward the car, now silent and empty as the fabric of a dream.

CHAPTER IV

FORGOTTEN TOWNS

A MARAGATAN woman of indefinable age whom the grandmother called Chosca, had led three pack animals toward the station. She piled the more bulky pieces of baggage on one of them, and still Chosca could find a place to sit and maintain her equilibrium on the crest of the mound, the difficult adjustment of which delayed the poor caravan for two entire hours. And although the grandmother loomed up also above the crest of another mountain of packages, still the more important trifles had to seek refuge in the saddlebags of the bell mule, the best of the drove, yielded through courtesy to Mariflor.

The girl examined everything carefully, and in silence; but the tenacious memory of events of the past overcame her determination to learn and to like new things. Being a woman and inquisitive, and, in addition, being young and full of enthusiasm, despite her inward misgivings, she experienced an impelling and respectful eagerness urging her toward the land where her mother had spent her youth, this land as uncomprehended and as silent as a secret of the future. What more beautiful example for any keen observer than the fortitude and equanimity, the gravity and ceremony with which

Florinda Salvadores submitted, without objection or fastidiousness, to all the vagaries of fate, and, changing her name, her style of dress, her plan of existence, mounted a mule for the first time in her life with as charming an air of gentility and imperiousness as if the crude sidesaddle were the soft cushion of an automobile! Adaptability and audacity imparted cheerful resolution to the girl; and she was fortified also by a subtle gust of fatalism in the depths of her soul, and by an unconscious desire for adventure stirring in her imagination.

Their passage through Astorga seemed to Florinda an event of rare solemnity. Her grandmother had a few errands to do, and wished to make purchases and collections in accordance with a roll of dingy papers stowed away with scrupulous precaution in a dark corner of the pocket which was carefully concealed beneath her skirts and petticoats. These tasks were overseen by the girl from her position on her saddle. She observed all, her eyes reflecting her amazement at the ancient city, now so poor and so forlorn that it did not retain even the vestiges of its glorious yesterday.

How desolate and petrified the city which was once the Roman Asturica Augusta! Who could imagine that it had been mistress of and seat of justice for Asturias, the imperial colony, the junction of four military roads, and the stronghold of her legions? Later it was looted by the barbarian and by the Moor; it became the jewel of the terrible Almanzor; later still it was the object of controversy and dispute between Castilians and Leonese. Today it retains not so much as the ruins of its ancient

monuments; even that strong fortress of its marquises and rulers, that superb castle that presumed to be everlasting, has fallen, along with the hewn stones of its broken ramparts. The arrogant device of Alvar Pérez Ossorio, that for so many generations had proclaimed from the nobiliary façade with flaunting letters:

> "Where once my weapons came to lodge
> No earthly force could make them move,"

was ignominiously buried beneath the litter of her towers and turrets, her Gothic spires and Latin tablets. What ranks, what minds, what irons, stones, and foundations are not moved in this world by the impetus of the centuries turning the wheel of fortune?

Thus, this mysterious land, of whose primitive dwellers nothing is known except the name, Amacos, or "excellent warriors"; this virile town which engraved on its escutcheon, as a symbol of heroism, a branch of the powerful oak; this ancient place once distinguished for its consuls, saints, and kings, surrounded by lofty towers and iron-studded gates, has fallen into the forlorn condition of all historic places abandoned by fortune.

The memory of those remote periods when the capital of the region and its suburbs was known as "Asturias" clings to Astorga like a sentence of singular predestination: Forgotten towns!

A faint conception of these sorrows and of these memories heightened the ardent desire in Mariflor's mind to evoke figures and to follow them down the

deserted streets, along the uninviting pavements, between the rows of adobe houses, symmetrical and ordinary. But all heroic memories, all bizarre evocations, vanish in the doleful presence of the once "August and Magnificent, Very Noble, Loyal and Meritorious City," which, silent, gray, languishes with sorrow in the shade of her famous cathedral, upon the pale ashes of the extinguished fire of her history. And when, by force of imagination and will power, the young traveler endeavored to reconstruct in her mind events and figures familiar to her native land, the vision of Astorga, deserted and forsaken, became obliterated on the flat and gloomy line of the horizon.

As the deliberations and the haggling with which Florinda's companions adjusted their accounts in the Plaza de los Cachos and on the porticos of the Plaza Mayor were interminable, and as her grandmother's other business affairs were no less prolix, it was mid afternoon when the three Amazons rode out through the suburb of Rectivía to follow the highroad leading to their pueblo.

As a result of her quiet sojourn in the city, Mariflor carried with her the memory of the two Maragatan men in the clock on the town hall who, each with hammer in hand, strike off the monotonous hours of that colorless existence; the patient and symbolic pair made for themselves a permanent place in the mind of the girl, standing out more clearly than the impression of the austere building itself, that rugged relic of past Asturian opulence. She had made inquiry about a pleasant garden, which, so she had been told, was the scene of summer

festivities and of other attractions for the young; although her grandmother had pointed and said "Over there," Florinda could discern nothing but a pleasant green patch lying above the rampart, on the same location where, centuries before, when a wealthy assemblage of Jews had lived in the suburb called San Andrés, the synagogue had stood. The airy profile of the cathedral and the nobility of some of the façades of the parochial churches also made an impression upon her curious mind. The heraldic design of wolves, of azure bars, the rampant lion in gules crowned with gold, the mounting of silver, crests of helmets, mottoes, crowns, reminders of noble lineage, discovered on a house here and there, brought to Florinda's mind a vague recollection of the ancient family names: Ossorios y Escobares; Turienzos y Pimentales; Benavides y Juncos, Gagos, Hormazas, Rojas, Pernías, Manriques. The associations aroused by these thoughts stimulated the girl's fancy, and a flash of pride glowed in her eyes when they fell upon the open rampart, undamaged by the choler of Witiza and Almanzor.

Having so often heard her father relate adventures of his childhood in the suburbs of the capital, she could almost have found her way in the dark along the Astorga road which she was now traversing for the first time.

There to the left, leaving behind the extended girdle of the fortifications, the ancient spring called Fuente Encalada gushes forth from so generous a breast that not even in the dryest season has it ever ceased to sing with its sonorous murmur of the sorrows and the glories of the land.

The spring, dating back many centuries to prehistoric times, is housed by a famous building displaying on its façade armorial designs, inscriptions, and profiles of great beauty. The water has lavished its unfailing gifts with ceaseless abundance upon the imperial gold seekers, the devotees of the French military road, as well as upon the Maragatan muleteers. The barbarians in their greed and their lust, who came first from the uttermost parts of the earth to enrich themselves in the mines of the Peninsula, have been almost forgotten; here passed the exploiters of the famous *médulas*, and also the crusaders who in the ninth century opened a difficult route from France in order to render homage to the body of Saint James the Apostle in Compostela. "The route of the silver" and that of the pilgrims has been obliterated by the broad Spanish highway of the eighteenth century, along which the plodding muleteer traffic is becoming extinguished in competition with the rapid railroad; centuries and generations, scepters and crowns, have come and have gone, and throughout their ephemeral day, and during the existence of all things perishable, this fount has offered its lifegiving stream and its perennial caress to all the thirsty who have passed along the way.

Mariflor's mind was obsessed by the thought of the ages during which the fountain had been telling, in prayerful and humble tones, of the forgotten towns, and she wished to take a drink of the faithful water; she drank eagerly, filled with the deceptive illusion of satisfying herself in the freshness and joys of eternity.

As she rode along, while the other Maragatan women seemed unconscious of the landscape and insensible to the emotion which it aroused, the girl discovered, to the right of the spring, a certain soft and swampy field sunken in the earth; this, no doubt, was the place called Era-Gudina, where the feudal estate belonging to the marquis had boasted a pool, a boat, a little island, and a grove.

The supposition that a skiff, a lake, and a forest could ever have existed here seemed to Mariflor a myth; but, consulting her grandmother concerning these legends, she asserted with great faith that "in the times of the Moors" this place had been called La Corona and that with its running waters, tiny barks, trees and flowers, it had been a veritable garden spot.

Beyond the walls of Astorga, where these pleasant signs of vegetation became obliterated, the road extended across the plain, level and monotonous, toward a horizon whose most distant extremity was inclosed by the cloud-tipped Sierras de la Cepeda and the rugged portals of Manzanal, Foncebadón, and El Teleno. If, within range of some primitive village, the ruins of an ancient fortification occasionally loomed into view, dwarfed bushes and native evergreen oaks would prove its sole embellishment.

In this ascetic picture the outline of the three Amazons was sketched upon the broad highroad, and when finally they turned in another direction to follow a stone-paved causeway, the waning light softened the asperity of the landscape, converting the hard and gloomy lines into a soft golden mass,

from which the footpaths led away as if into some mysterious realm.

Then the aridity of the route would be mercifully concealed; otherwise, as they made their way by sharp, winding trails into the interior, its desolation would have been more vividly revealed to Florinda. The holy beatitude of the coming night spread its romantic veil over the barrenness of the untilled soil; strips of mist, like long tatters of white muslin, floated over the land, and the peaceful, pale-blue sky seemed to hover over the plain with infinite tenderness.

Mariflor, tired and sleepy, half stupefied by her emotions and sentiments, gave herself up to dreams, and allowed her imagination to run riot among the vague fancies woven of shadows and of memories. The rhythmic motion of her mount, somewhat suggestive of the swaying of a boat on a calm sea, and the expanse of plain, with no shore in sight, cloud-hung, as fathomless as an abyss, produced in the young Amazon's mind the impression of sailing toward some chimerical region. As if to make the dream more realistic, the cradlelike motion and the illusion of a venturesome bark were accompanied by snatches of songs, the echo of tender and agreeable phrases which the innocent girl cherished in her heart; with this stimulating treasure she began with diligent speed to contrive future intrigues of love and happiness, a courtship leading to a solemn event such as a wedding, all of which seemed to bear some positive and joyous relation to the glowing existence of a star, judging by the ecstatic expression of her upturned face.

However, after her excursion into divine space, Florinda soon fell to earth, for a voice had said:

"Here we are!"

In the lacy texture of the ever deepening shadows appeared the dim and faintly outlined signs of a tiny hamlet, a very poor one, judging from the evidence on the outskirts. Mariflor was suddenly overcome by a sensation of dismay, a heart-sinking in which fear and sorrow mingled with unexplainable poignancy; that brusque plunge into a strange town, into an unfamiliar house, among persons she had never seen before, definitively breaking all the ties of her former life, chilled and terrified the girl. With pitiless lucidity the recollections of her once joyous existence, of the happiness she had left behind on the other side of the Maragatan plain, flashed across her mind, and she felt so small, so incapable, and so weak in the presence of the enigma of her new career, that she wished she might never reach Valdecruces, that she might remain forever rocked on that firm and silent sea of earth and shadow.

Her pleading eyes searched the sky with an expression of anguish, but the watchful moon was not in sight, the stars were cold and unresponsive, the heavens were pale and overcast, and the broad canopy of night seemed oblivious to the girl's mute supplication; even the ardent little star by which but a few moments before she had lighted the fire of her dreams had inconsiderately concealed itself behind a bank of clouds.

In the dim light the Maragatan village lay as silent and motionless as a corpse; and the mules

stopped before a shadow longer drawn out and more important than those in the distance.

The creaking of a door was heard, and two women approached in a dim ray of light. Florinda dismounted, tremulous and fearful; she realized that she was being greeted by warm, moist kisses, and embraced by strong, welcoming arms. This cordial reception was tendered by Ramona, daughter-in-law and niece of the old woman, and by Olalla, her daughter, who with her four younger brothers and sisters and the old tia Dolores, guardian of her granddaughter, Mariflor, constituted the home and family.

The children, Marinela, Pedro, Carmen, and Tomás, had all gone to bed; and while Olalla did the honors to her cousin with more affection than grace, Ramona and the other two women assumed the task of unpacking the mules. This took so much time that it was late in the night before Mariflor, who was weak with exhaustion, could at last retire.

By the flickering light of the candle the girl could make out that her room was the best in the house, *el cuarto de respeto*, where the most important guests were always lodged; and when at last she sank into the high and pompous bed, she could hear the humble voice of her cousin wishing her good night, saying, before closing the door and leaving the room in darkness:

"Mother and I both sleep near by, so you needn't be afraid."

Not long afterward the girl heard the creaking of the ceiling beams not far above her head; Olalla

and her mother were walking heavily about the upper room, speaking in cautious tones.

Lying in her couch, half asleep and half awake, Mariflor seemed to be obsessed by the indefinable and sorrowful expression of a face and a pair of blue eyes which now seemed to be Terán's, and again seemed to be Olalla's. At last no trace of the friendly face remained except the eyes, and they were looking into hers; they shone as blue as the cornflower, as the Celtic eyes of the blond Maragatan girl, as the thoughtful eyes of the novelist she had met on her journey; finally a transparent haze that seemed to be gradually thickening obscured them. Was it a veil of tears? Was it the crystal of a pair of eyeglasses? Mariflor had fallen asleep.

After a long and refreshing rest Florinda awoke and listened; she listened to solitude and to silence, for everything round about her seemed to be deserted and mute.

What time could it be? A ray of sunlight entered the little window, which was as small and as high as the window of a stateroom on a steamer; through this she could see a bit of blue sky flooded with light. No echo of footsteps could be heard throughout the big and mysterious house, no sound of voices, not the slightest noise, and outside, in that luminous space, open perhaps to the country, to the street, or to the yard, life, she thought, seemed to be a secret, for not a bird was flying, not a river was singing, not a wheel was creaking; the village sounds Florinda had heard in other pueblos

seemed to be deadened here. Had she and the sunshine been left alone in the world?

Her sleepy eyes, still somewhat beclouded by vague uneasiness, wandered over the room; they discovered the baggage scattered about in confusion; and, lying on a trunk, which was still bound by ropes, was the Maragatan costume she had taken off the evening before. Her worn and dusty slippers peeped out from under the bed; ranged one before the other, they seemed frightened, and as if they wished to run away. The great pouch, hanging from the bedpost with its mouth agape, wore an air of expectancy and amazement, and the string of corals, pendant from the edge of a picture frame near the bed, crowned the ancient figure of a representation of the Virgin, beneath which, in very large letters, was the legend: Our Lady la Blanca. As Florinda's eyes turned toward her she mechanically made the sign of the cross. Then they continued their curious journey around the room: it was small and low, with irregular whitewashed walls; the rough ceiling beams were left uncovered and were painted yellow, as were the door and the window. Between a heavy chest of interesting design and a tall old-fashioned chiffonier, stood the bed, broad and high, having the hardest of mattresses, and dressed with too many covers; it boasted a crocheted spread with a heavy fringe and elaborate design, and its dingy color seemed to denote that it had long been packed away. Two modest little chairs seemed to be bending beneath the weight of Florinda's luggage; a few nails climbing high up the wall as if lost were negligently sustaining several

useless objects—a ragged petticoat, a bell without a clapper, a faded paper rose. There were no other utensils or decorations in Mariflor's little, new room.

She solicitously sought a mirror, a washstand, a rug, some evidence of beauty and comfort, and as she found nothing befitting her needs, she turned her attention to the recollection of her arrival, confused by the emotions of her journey and by her surprise at this unusual awakening.

At last, as the desertlike silence remained unbroken, and the sunshine penetrated the room through the tiny window as through the porthole of a ship, the unhappy girl, with the motion of her saddle animal and the illusion of her navigation across the plain still lingering, thought that her vessel had grounded on a hostile shore, a deserted strand. But no, the sea laments, prays, hurls the spray, sobs; it has tears and voices and sighs; it is passion and beauty, it is restlessness and power, it is pain and joy; but in this room, not a sound, not a movement, not an indication that life throbs and vibrates as on the infinite waves of the sea!

When the girl had really begun to feel a certain uneasiness somewhat akin to fear, a muffled sound, something between a sigh and a growl, was heard in a distant room.

"Grandmother!" called Mariflor, alarmed.

No one replied.

"Grandmother!" she repeated, shaking with terror. And then, still more frightened, she shouted:

"Olalla!"

The massive door half opened cautiously, and

the grave and startled countenance of Olalla Salvadores peeped in.

Meeting the kindly gleam of her blue eyes, Florinda became calm; she smiled and then confessed:

"I was afraid; I had begun to think I was alone in Valdecruces, and then I heard a kind of moaning, something like a voice from the other world."

"It must have been the cat meowing," said the girl, wondering at her cousin's alarm. Stepping into the room, she offered Florinda her breakfast, and with much courtesy, asked how she had passed the night.

"Only too well; I didn't wake up once," replied the sleepyhead, scandalized to learn that it was nine o'clock, that her aunt and grandmother were out attending to the chores, and that the children had long ago started for school.

While Mariflor dressed, Olalla explained that the school was three kilometers away, in Piedralbina, as also were the doctor and the apothecary. The youngsters carried their lunch in a knapsack, and did not return until six.

"And in winter too?" asked Florinda.

"Yes; they leave in the dark and return in the dark; sometimes Tomás doesn't go."

"How old is he?"

"Five; but he is big and strong."

"Poor child! It seems hard to think of him trudging over these plains!"

"It is harder on Marinela; she gets more tired than he does."

"Oh, yes, grandmother said she is not very well. Why do you let her go, then?"

"She doesn't know what to do with herself here, she gets sad and she cries so much; and as she loves to embroider and to work dainty designs, and the teacher is so fond of her, mother consents to letting her go."

"And the doctor, what does he say?"

Olalla shrugged her shoulders.

"He says," she murmured, "that her illness is due to her age; but in my opinion the poor child has some trouble with her chest."

"What do you mean?"

"That she has consumption, just as my father has, just as so many of the family have!"

"Don't say that!"

As she was starting to fasten the heavy skirt about her waist, Mariflor glanced around as if searching for something; she looked at her hands scrutinizingly, with extreme interest, and finally she managed to stammer a request:

"I would like to wash, if only I had water."

Olalla, who seemed lost in gloomy meditation, started, flushed, and after a moment of reflection, replied:

"I'll bring some in a pitcher."

"No; let me go; tell me where the things I need are, and I'll get them."

Both girls insisted with somewhat artificial eagerness, and after she had crossed the threshold, Florinda bethought herself of her half-nude condition, and asked:

"Are we alone in the house?"

"Yes; I was going around quietly in order not to awaken you."

Olalla disappeared, stepping carefully, as if some one were still sleeping; and the stranger, entering the corridor, crossed her bare arms to shelter herself from a penetrating cold that was sweeping down the hall. Suddenly, in the shadow and silence, somewhere beneath her feet she heard the plaintive, moaning sounds that had alarmed her before; they seemed to mingle and merge in a voice almost human which at once pleaded and repelled like the voice of an animal.

Florinda stepped back, the victim once more of a nameless fear, and in order to distract her mind, she began to move the baggage about from one place to another, and to make all the noise possible, until her cousin returned bringing a glazed earthenware bowl, and, hanging over her shoulder, a harsh towel, yellowed by time, fragrant with rosemary.

Mariflor, perplexed by this crude service, put off washing and asked for help in opening the trunk; but Olalla, requiring no other assistance than her own vigorous arms, turned it over, unfastened the ropes, leaving it ready to be unpacked, with the cover commodiously supported against the wall. The two girls bent over the swelling contents of the trunk, and Mariflor thrust in her hand, ran it along the bottom, as if searching for something, and finally brought to light a small, smooth object and held it up to Olalla's nose.

"Does it smell nice?" she asked.

"Ah, soap! I had a cake of it once——"

Judging by the far-away expression of her blue

eyes, the aroma seemed to carry her mind back to some period in the remote past when she had possessed a cake of soap.

"Take out everything, if you wish," said her cousin, with a charming air of friendliness. "As soon as I get washed we'll put them all away, and I'll show you the gifts I've brought you and the children."

While Florinda was splashing about in the water, Olalla busied herself taking the things out of the trunk and laying them on the bed, which was still warm and had not yet been made up. She moved with deliberation and handled the delicate garments with care, but did not stop to look at them with excessive curiosity.

Almost the entire luxury of the small wardrobe consisted of lingerie; chemises and drawers trimmed with ribbons and bows, and which had never been worn; they were folded over papers laid under the laces and embroideries that rustled like silk, resembling the bridal trousseau of the daughters of the wealthy; there were lace stockings, tiny-embroidered handkerchiefs, dainty petticoats, two dressing gowns with short sleeves, two stylish yellow blouses, and only one frock; this was black, exceedingly modest, and devoid of trimmings. A few tiny boxes containing almost childish trifles, a sewing basket, books, photographs, packages of fragile objects, and a white case with a lace edging from whose open mouth she had just taken the perfumed soap.

"That's all," said Olalla, while Florinda hesitated, trying to decide what to put on, fearing she

might injure the luxurious kerchief that belonged to her best dress.

After a moment of indecision, her cousin offered to try to find another for her; one that would serve for everyday use, and which she did not need herself; but it must have proved a difficult task, for by the time she returned with it, Mariflor had combed her hair and had put the room in order.

"There is another, a cotton one, around somewhere, but I can't find it," said Olalla, unfolding a straw-colored muslin handkerchief with a gayly colored stamped border.

"That's such a pretty one! Why don't you wear it yourself?"

"This is good enough for me, for every day," smiled the girl, glancing at her faded kerchief, which also had a bright design of flowers.

"Don't you wear one over your head?" Olalla asked.

"Ah, no indeed! I don't like it that way!" Florinda replied so positively that she immediately felt ashamed, and she tried to conceal her embarrassment by putting a few packages into Olalla's hands, while she said:

"A book for Pedro, a sewing basket for Marinela, a doll for Carmen, and a top for Tomasín.

She fumbled in the pouch hanging from the bedpost, and, with a tremor of emotion, said:

"For you, my watch; here, take it."

Olalla sank into a chair, making a place in her lap for the packages, and Florinda placed the tiny steel and gold watch, which was industriously ticking away, in the palm of her hand. Olalla pressed

it against her ear and laughed with a childish expression, sweetening the sorrowful lines of her face, and by way of comment said:

"So little, and yet it goes!"

Then she glanced at her cousin tenderly and lamented:

"But you will be left without one!"

"I have the one that belonged to mamma. It isn't going, but it will serve me as a souvenir of her."

"Is it broken?"

"No; my father wished to keep it set at the hour at which she died; three o'clock."

"The hour of Our Lord!" whispered Olalla, deeply touched. And with the respect and tenderness with which the dead are held in the Maragatan region, she blessed the memory which had been evoked, murmuring fervently, after the custom of the country:

"*Biendichosa!*"

The intimate conversation was interrupted by an outburst of emotion, while moistened eyes were lowered, overcome by sorrow; Carmen's doll, bursting through the paper that enwrapped it, thrust forth a rigid, red-sleeved arm in a tragic attitude; in the rustic hand of Olalla Salvadores the shining watch beat on with indifference: tic-tac, tic-tac.

And this sonorous and mechanical ticking, this firm beating of an industrious heart of steel, played its part, for some strange reason, in assisting the two girls to listen to the accelerated beating of their own true and youthful hearts, which were stimulated by the same generous blood.

Olalla arose to her feet with an energy unusual in her shy, serious disposition, and the two girls gazed into each other's eyes; Florinda's were deep and restless, the color of honey and of roasted coffee, vainly inviting a transcendent confidence in the calm and sorrowful depths of the blue ones; but deep down in their souls an impulse of cordiality was aroused and a pact of love was signed by a fervent kiss.

CHAPTER V

VALDECRUCES

MARIFLOR, encouraged by this gentle alliance, experienced a sensation of fortitude to face the realities of life, and she wished to inspect everything, to see her new home, to take a look at Valdecruces.

Although she placed her feet on the rickety floor of the dark corridor with no little caution, she walked on with a smile on her face, as if playing a game of blindman's buff, groping her way by touching the wall with one hand and grasping her cousin's clothing with the other.

"You will have to lead me," she murmured, "I can't see a thing. Do we go up or down?"

"I'll guide you till you get used to it. I can find my way around every one of the corners with my eyes shut. Now take a step up—now another—keep on climbing—— There, now you see light!"

Through a crack in the door a feeble ray of light penetrated as far as the upper part of the stairs; a key squeaked, hinges groaned, and Florinda found herself bathed in sunshine, dazzled by the torrent of light flooding into the tiny room through two broad doors giving upon an open gallery.

"How bright it is! How pleasant!" Florinda exclaimed, with pleasure. "And what is there to

see beyond here?" she added, turning curiously in the direction of the balcony.

All at once she could see nothing. The harsh, strong light obscured the landscape as might a heavy mist. After a time, by shading her eyes with both hands, she could faintly discern the outlines of the modest little adobe houses, thatched with sheaves of straw, mingling with earth of the same hue, stooping as if the weight of the rotting roofs compelled them to sink to their knees to plead for grace or pity. In this attitude of submission and affliction, the wretched little houses, crouching, reverent, exhaled a delicate white steam that seemed to be the incense wafted by their vows and prayers.

Mariflor, startled by the novelty of the spectacle she had so often pictured to herself through her reading and through the tales she had heard, exclaimed with emotion:

"Valdecruces! It looks like the manger where Our Lord was born that we see on Christmas Eve! And where is the church?" she asked.

"On the other side. Do you see that row of houses? Down at the end of the row; do you see a belfry with a cross? There!"

"That?" lamented the explorer in disillusion.

"The roof is of tile," proudly announced Olalla, "and on the inside our church is better than the one at Piedralbina, and it's as good as the one at Valdespino; there is a beautiful Resurrection, and the Virgin's face is of ivory."

"But the tower looks as if it's ready to fall, it's simply enormous! It's nothing but a shapeless heap, with the cross off on one side; how strange!"

"But that thing you are looking at," protested Olalla, laughing heartily, "is the stork's nest!"

"Oh, the nest! An immense nest, isn't it? A tremendous nest! How eager I was to see it! My father used to tell me about your having it here."

"It used to be in Lagobia, but the year of the great thunderstorm their tower fell down, and when the birds came back they brought the nest to Valdecruces."

"The birds did? All by themselves?"

"They began all alone, but finally the people fell to and helped them. At first the nest was not so big; just big enough for the mother bird to set on; then, each year, they all began to gather here, and with so much weight, of course, it had to fall."

"And what happened then?"

"The priest, Uncle Chosco, and Uncle Rosendín went to work and propped it up."

"Ah, how good! Are there any young birds in it now?"

"The mother stork is not setting yet; she hatches her eggs along about the month of June. Look, look, see the male bird!"

A long-shanked white stork, with black-tipped wings, long of neck, his feet and beak red, flew over their heads, crunking, magnificent, winging his way toward the tower.

"How tame! Do you see? He almost touched the overhanging roof," said Olalla.

Mariflor remained silent, watching the bird sacred to the tillers of the soil in Castile, the tutelary bird of the planted fields, the queen of the air above the mother plains of the *patria*.

"Some time I'll go and make a visit to the regal nest," she murmured fervently. Then she turned toward the light-flooded horizon; it was clear and calm, resembling an extensive bay lying asleep on a summer's day and unrippled by a single breath.

Olalla pointed out:

"Down below is the garden."

"Are there any flowers?"

"Dogwood and thyme, and two new rosebushes with buds."

"Shall we go down?"

"Don't you want to see the dovecote first?"

"Yes, yes; of course!"

The gallery ran the entire length of the building; the floor was uneven, and creaked at every step, as did the entire upper story of the house; the worm-eaten railing was tremulous and rickety; swallows built their nests in the overhanging eaves; here and there hung faded garments, and the cracked walls were decorated by an occasional bunch of medicinal herbs hanging up to dry, and bundles of vegetables wrapped with exceeding caution so that the ripened seeds could be preserved when they should burst.

All these details surprised the inquisitive eyes which afterward sought the parlor with not a little apprehension.

This was a spacious, low-ceiled room, with rude, yellow-painted beams, like those in Mariflor's tiny bedroom; the walls, palely anæmic in appearance, sagging here and there, were crudely whitened and deeply wrinkled, like the faces of arrogant old women in convivial cities. A willow sofa with beflowered and swollen sateen cushions extended

down the length of the room, and high above it hung a little dimmed and spotted, black-framed mirror making a futile bow, as if in expectation of a visit which never came. Round about this forlorn mirror, and scattered over the other walls, a series of chromos commemorated the pathetic life story of martyred saints, young and graceful. Faded photographs, almost unrecognizable, imprisoned within frames which once had been gilded, confined by cracked and wounded glass, climbed in a disorderly ascent, a veritable jumble of hangings, from the old decorations consisting of almanacs and a dried branch of laurel, to the half-tanned lamb skins open in the form of a cross. Among the chairs which stood close together as if in warlike array, were some that denoted times of greater prosperity for the Salvadores family; those of rep and ebony with the hair filling of the seat poorly held in place by clumsy stitches, the green cover converted into a faded gold, like autumn foliage; the two gutta-percha chairs, threadbare and sunken, with curving backs and inviting arms; the classic console and the friendly table, denoted the happy days of abundance when the aged grandmother and her cousin Juan by their union joined the most powerful fortunes of Valdecruces, cultivable lands, rye fields, garden plots, and droves of beasts of burden.

Mariflor, who, with her keen sensibilities, was gifted with the exquisite and bitter privilege of evoking the past and understanding the transitory significance of objects, investing them with the tenderness of her own disposition, did not progress beyond these thoughts.

Unconscious of this rare gift, which endows some choice spirits with the double faculty of enjoying and of suffering to an extreme degree, the girl instantly pictured to herself the painful declivity of sorrows down which the passing years, the grinding poverty of the region, and the thirteen children, had precipitated the house and the inheritance round about the aged grandmother; and a wave of sympathy beclouded the eyes which but a moment ago were smiling at the orgy of light that flooded the heath.

"The life of St. Geneviéve; are you familiar with it?" asked Olalla, assuming an air of piety, calling her attention to the series of chromos hanging on the walls; and seeing that her cousin displayed no signs of familiarity with that exemplary tale, she pointed at an image wrought with native dexterity, and added, with edifying satisfaction:

"This is the traitor, Golo. Here," indicating another picture, "is the hind that reared the child in the desert."

The bronzed finger rested on one cracked and dingy glass after another. It halted at a blacker and more penetrating incision long enough for her to exclaim in a declamatory voice:

"These glasses are covered with cracks—— The youngsters destroy everything!"

"Come, let's go up to see the doves," pleaded Florinda impatiently, but Olalla detained her, showing no sign of haste.

"And see! These flowers are Marinela's work."

The two cousins, with uplifted eyes and half-opened lips, gazed with a stupid air at a net hanging

from the ceiling, crocheted by hand and dyed vermilion, all decorated with gay strips of cloth which the school-teacher at Piedralbina had christened with the suggestive name of "flowers."

"Very nice," murmured the newcomer, smiling generously.

Still, before leaving the room, Olalla opened first one door and then another, facing the gallery, to show her cousin two small windowless rooms which were filled with luggage.

"See what a mess," she said, pointing to the haversacks, panniers, and saddlebags heaped on the floor. "Everything was left in disorder last night!"

Florinda thought she detected in these words an air of brusqueness, of tedium, and of weariness.

"Now there'll be two of us to do the work in the house," she replied affably.

"In the house? I never come up here; I have other things to do."

"But you don't have to do outside work," said Mariflor uneasily, despite the tone of conviction in her assertion.

"Wouldn't you call washing the clothes in the ditch and hoeing the vegetable garden, and toiling in the wheat field 'outside work'?"

Olalla enumerated the different fields in which she had to work with an ardor unbefitting her sing-song and labored speech, but without a sign of reproach or complaint, and even with a vague smile of pride and fortitude.

"Then there is sewing to be done, and cooking," she continued emphatically, carried away by the relation of the duties imposed upon her by destiny.

"And la Chosca," asked Mariflor, in disconsolate tones, "what does she do, then?"

"She takes care of the saddle mules, and the oxen, child, and works in the plowed fields with my mother and the other women day laborers, and gathers the heaviest of the wood——"

"Your mother, too?"

"She does not," replied Olalla with a tinge of bitterness.

The two girls were in the room at the end of the house opening upon the uncovered portion of the gallery which flooded the little parlor with a splendrous tapestry of sunshine. With the warm air, lightly impregnated with perfumes from the garden, smoke from the chimneys, and vapors from the mangers, the deep stillness that pervaded the village seemed to penetrate to the corner where Olalla and Florinda, suddenly become silent, startled and saddened, stood there among the haversacks and bags, packsaddles and hampers.

Suddenly they were surprised by a hoarse and mournful cadence, repeated again and again as if some one were moaning in pain.

"It is the cooing of the doves," said Olalla, raising her eyes.

"Take me to them," repeated Florinda, speaking softly, as if fearing to interrupt their cooing by her words.

Her cousin took her by the hand, and, stepping into the corridor, closed the door, so that the two girls were left in the most profound darkness. Florinda stumbled on, unable to see.

"Why do you close the door?" she complained. "We haven't a ray of light."

"The cat will get into the gallery and scatter the seeds."

As if to protest against the evil intention attributed to him, the animal mewed in the dark, touchingly and humbly.

"Puss, puss!" ordered Olalla several times, frightening it away.

Again feeling their way onward through the dark, the girls climbed a creaking staircase, very difficult and rickety, and at last gained the dark and ruinous garret, the floor of which was strewn with slippery straw. A wooden partition and a little door, both letting golden streaks of sunlight through their cracks, divided the place into halves; there, on the other side of the partition wall, whence proceeded the beams of light, sounded the cooing of the doves.

With a gentle push on the boards, Olalla opened the dovecote, and at first Florinda could see nothing but the light, just as had happened a few moments before on the gallery. The window in the roof framed a bit of sky which was as a flood of sunlight within the dovecote; soft nests, sheltered by the adobes, gave refuge to the setting mother birds and the trembling squabs, and from every occupied nest, lined with downy feathers, the tiny eyes of the birds were turned to glance round about them in fear and suspicion.

"How pretty they are! And what a lot of them! And they don't try to get away!" exclaimed Mariflor in delight.

"They are timid, but they don't fly off," said

Olalla, lavishing a caress upon the occupants of each nest. As her cousin wished to take the pigeons in her hand, she lifted two tiny creatures from beneath the mother's wings and offered them to her. Mariflor sheltered them in her apron, for fear of injuring them between her fingers, and because, overcome by a sudden aversion, she hesitated to touch them.

"They are hideously ugly before they have feathered," said Olalla with a smile, and gave each of them a kiss, holding them in her hands an instant, pressing them to her heart with a sweet maternal gesture before returning them to their terrified mother. Then she took from beneath a feverish female a little egg warm and smooth, and held it out for Mariflor to see, saying thoughtfully:

"They lay two every month!"

"You will soon have a very beautiful flock!"

"Nonsense, child! A great many of them die during the winter, with the cold and the snow, and we sell the finest pigeons for the market in Astorga and León."

"Doesn't it make you feel sad?"

"But that's what they are for!"

Florinda was startled at the cold and deliberate explanation, which obliterated the impression of tenderness caused by the recent kiss and the cordial impulse, and darkened the soul of the peasant girl with strange mystery.

As Olalla had bent over the nests of the mother birds, a tuft of feathers had clung to her jacket; had nothing but this faint trace been left upon the girl's breast by the loving caress? Nothing else?

Mariflor doubted it as she eagerly studied the

attractive brown countenance which guarded the secret of a feminine heart against all attacks of intimate curiosity. Sealed with an expression of austere calm, placid and sweet, with a touch of sadness, the face of Olalla Salvadores was an enigma, the noble mask of sentiments absolutely unrevealed and impenetrable.

As her cousin studied her face in an endeavor to understand her, Olalla said amiably:

"I will call the whole flock so you can see them."

"How many pairs have you?"

"Thirty-three; not half of them are inside here."

"And are they all of the same breed?"

"Most of them are domestic doves; but I have mourning, booted, crested, crowned, Tripolines—"

Olalla filled her apron with barley which she scooped up from a small bin separated from the floor by a crude frame, and she climbed agilely up to the window, resting her feet on the uneven projections along the wall; and leaning far out of the window, in alluring and honeyed tones, she gave the familiar call:

"*Zura, zura——Zurita!*"

The nests in the dovecote swayed, and a lively flapping of wings on the outside whipped the light; the entire flock came flying in by pairs to peck the grains from the girl's hands. There were doves with ringlets; doves with hoods, with tufts, with spurs; there were gray doves, green, blue, lead-colored; some wore white collars, others had golden beaks, others seemed to have their feet dressed in mourning; some had metallic reflections on their breasts, on their wings, on the tiny feathers on the back of

their heads. All the different varieties had become domesticated, being acclimated to the region by crossings with the wild breeds and by the weak ones dying off during the intensely cold winters.

The nesting mothers left their eggs and came out to feed, brushing Olalla's cheeks with their wings; she made a place in the window frame for Mariflor, and enumerated and explained the variety of the flock, as the greedy birds crowded close together, fluttering and trembling.

Mariflor climbed up until she could see the swaying and sagging roof where the birds, massed together, cooed and begged for food; but Olalla said complacently:

"Now I'm going to send you all into the dovecote!"

With a noisy crash she flung the contents of her apron on the floor.

Then an impatient flight carried the birds from the humble roof to the window and into the room betewen Olalla's breast and Florinda's head. The girl sprang down to see the doves more closely, and they looked at her in surprise, from one side, with one eye only, while wings flapped and beaks vibrated up and down; the impetuous sounds prompted by instinct and by passion, the harsh and greedy music of the pecking bills striking against the board floor, the cooing, the flapping of wings, filled the air, while with mixed voracity and love they chanted their laws and prerogatives in forceful notes; the females, which suffer a fever of holy maternal solicitude in the nest, called their young pigeons down to the circle and urged them to eat, disputing the grain

with the less aggressive gourmands; the gallant males and solicitous fathers stuffed their crops; then the flock became more quiet, and Florinda, saturated with the pungent odor exhaled by the dovecote, dazzled by the rainbowlike gleam of the feathers, excited by the fluttering of the birds, transported by the sunlight, keenly sensed the potent beauty of that sweet wild life, free and prolific, that now extended its high and joyous flight in loving pairs across the luminous and boundless plain, like messengers from the infinite.

After the doves had flown away, the dazzled eyes of Florinda encountered the intrepid figure of Olalla looming above the dovecote, in the focus of the harsh light, with her serene profile in relief against the clear indigo of the sky; she was bidding farewell to the flock with gentle words, chiding the birds and giving them bits of advice; she assumed a childish accent, harmonizing her voice with the cooing of the doves, as they floated off into space; her kerchief had fallen from her head, revealing a blond coil, close and firm, glowing on her brown neck like a crown of golden sunshine above a field of ripened wheat; the sky was reflected in her limpid eyes, which now had turned a deeper blue; the wild roses in her cheeks flamed with a glow of youth; her light-brown face shone like a glossy fruit, and between her half-opened, luscious lips gleamed her firm, even, white teeth.

The young girl's figure, peculiarly well adapted to the regional costume, dominating the unique picture, heightened by the strength of the sun, possessed the strange beauty and the sylvan sweetness of a

red flower of blood and of health combined with the rustic grace of a vigorous poppy, the spontaneous smile of the heath.

Mariflor, amazed, as if she had seen her cousin suddenly changed into another woman, recalled nothing of her recent emotions save those aroused by the tuft of feathers left clinging to Olalla's bodice, the token of a strange caress.

A sound of weariness and sobbing reverberated throughout the dovecote, issuing from the lower end of the building, and as the silence was broken the girl standing in the little window high above the floor shuddered.

When Olalla sprang promptly to the side of her cousin she seemed to have suddenly lost her sublime, commanding beauty. In the blue depths of her eyes there floated no expression of grandeur; nothing but a slight physical trepidation faintly rippled the serene crystal of her pupils; the harsh expression on her plebeian mouth and the absence of placidity gave her an air of abandonment almost abhorrent. Perhaps her bearing was too vigorous and her face too round; perhaps her feet and hands were too masculine. The tuft of feathers had disappeared from her bodice.

"Don't put on your kerchief again," pleaded Florinda, seeing her make a hasty gesture as if to cover her head; and then Olalla, accomplishing her purpose without replying, exclaimed:

"It has struck ten; the kettle will be burned dry, and the fire out!"

The light, the cooing of the doves, the acrid odor of the nesting places, the fine liberty of the wings,

were left behind the cracked door; and Mariflor, feeling her way down the dark staircase, pressed her cousin's hand as she repeated:

"You have such beautiful braids! Why don't you want to show them?"

"It is not the custom."

"You and I will set that fashion."

"For you it is a different matter, but as for me——"

"You are ever so much prettier without the kerchief."

The darkness before her became more dense, as if night were rising up from the lower story of the house. A gust of chill wind surprised Florinda, who so recently had been bathed by the glowing sunshine.

Through the dusky corridors of the first floor the two girls made their way to the large and dimly-lighted kitchen with its humble fireplace and its earthen floor; a few small oaken stands, an old dish cupboard, a set of smoke-begrimed shelves, a rickety table, and a whatnot decorated the room; hanging by a pot chain directly over the fire glittered an enormous kettle.

As Olalla sank to her knees, vigorously poking the coals, blowing into the ashes and stirring the dry contents of the kettle, Mariflor, timid and smiling, said:

"And my breakfast?"

"Oh, of course! I'm so excited I actually don't know what I'm doing to-day!" stammered Olalla, bustling about among the earthen cooking pots. "See, here you have some soup—do you like it?"

"Soup! What kind?"

"Potato."

A gravy black with pepper rose to the edge of the small vessel.

"Do you call this stew a soup?" asked Florinda, carefully replacing the cover again.

"That is what we call it in this country."

"But—if only there were something else!" suggested the city girl, glancing about the room.

"You can cut a piece of sausage off the string."

"No; something light—"

"Chocolate, coffee, none of those fine things—we haven't anything of the kind."

"Not even a little sip of milk?"

"The goats give only a tiny bit for Tomás and Marinela, but I'll let you have half of it."

"No, no; it will soon be noon now. I will wait."

"Are you going to starve yourself to death, child? And last night you scarcely ate any supper! You don't like these stews and soups of ours; you are used to something different; and here everything is so poverty-stricken!"

Olalla, on her knees before the hearth, raising her kindly face surrounded by the smoke from the fireplace, again assumed an expression of weariness and grief that suddenly aged her smile to semblance of her grandmother's.

"I like everything; you shall see," murmured Mariflor, and she heroically tasted the potato soup.

Then she ventured into the rooms which she had not yet seen, into the yard and the garden, while Olalla, industrious as ever, tried to brighten the fire

by thrusting into the dark, smoking ashes a few roots of heather.

The three rooms where the women and children slept were scarcely better lighted than the kitchen: small transoms crossed by iron bars gave the appearance of a prison. The beds, spongy and clean, were covered with brightly colored quilts; the floor was of wood, the furniture was very poor and scattered over the place with no attempt at orderliness. One room, called the parlor, and which might have been used as a dining room, provided access to the yard and to the kitchen, to which it gave more light than did the high small grilled window with its smoke-begrimed panes thwarting all vision of passers-by. Upon the same north side were the front door and the transoms of the bedrooms. The stable, rambling and deep, the little parlor, and Mariflor's room, opened upon the gallery above the yard and the little garden; over these stood forth in the light the balcony, the sala, and the dovecote.

As soon as Florinda had given a hasty glance about the inner rooms, she walked into the yard, and from there passed on to the garden.

The two solitary rosebushes, which were growing directly underneath the little window resembling the porthole of a stateroom, were in bud. A solitary tree, which looked to Florinda like a pear tree, dominated the garden, where cauliflowers and head cabbages, with other homely, ordinary vegetables, well cared for in symmetrical squares, stood erect and vigorous in the bright sunshine.

A small bench beside the tree invited to rest, and although the flowery branches were not very luxu-

riant, she took advantage of the refuge, and the solitude, the dainty perfume of the half-opened buds, the delicate green of the curly vegetables, the light swaying of the rosebushes along the borders, the flower of the broom and of the dog-rose climbing the fence, all the varying features of the humble garden, possessed for Mariflor at the moment a profound reality. Subtle emotions perturbed her; over the poverty of her paternal home, over the impenetrable melancholy of the country, and the dark mystery of the lives of which she had caught but a glimpse, the girl shed the tenderness of her swelling heart with the heroic intention of loving and of enduring. In order to gain, what? Yes, to win a joy so great and so rare that it seemed a dream, something impossible. It was necessary that she, Mariflor Salvadores, the girl accustomed to ease and to adulation, should face these privations and sacrifices with fortitude and courage, so that, by way of reward, God should triumphantly elect her the wife of an artist, the ideal of a poet. From what direction, along what miraculous path, would Don Quixote come to rescue her? She had not yet lifted the cross to her shoulders, and already the poor dreamer was impatient for redemption!

From the yard came the sound of footsteps, and Florinda thrilled in delusion. It was Olalla who was standing near the gate, and saying:

"How I startled you, child!"

"Can't you come here and sit down a few minutes?"

"No; I must cut a few sticks of wood, because I can't get the fire to burn." With a promising

gesture, somewhat pompously, she added brightly:

"This evening you are surely going to receive a visit!"

The announcement floated to her like some wild, fabulous tale told by the wind, which, presenting itself suddenly, panted, with fervid and roaring breath, like a gust of the sirocco.

Along the dry edge of the garden plot the flowers of the broom and of the dog-rose shuddered; on the other side of the fence the axe sank into the trunks of heather with skill, while a few light tufts of cloud darkened the blue sky.

Mariflor thought confusedly of the possibility that in those houses which she saw crouching beneath their roofs of thatch there might be dingy little kitchens surrounded by forlorn little gardens; and that also there might be beautiful maidens; perhaps, too, there were mysterious cats and concealed clocks which broke the silence from time to time with their tremulous mewing and with the harsh striking of their unmusical gongs.

CHAPTER VI

REALITY AND FANTASY

"THE stranger girl, do you call her Mariflor?"

"That is what we call her."

"Well, I have a letter here for her."

Mounted on his sorrel horse, which was long of mane and sunken of haunches, the man deliberately opened his patched mail sack, drew out an envelope, and read from it slowly: "León. Señorita Mariflor Salvadores. Astorga. Valdecruces."

"Here it is," he murmured, handing it to Ramona.

As Ramona called the interested person, tío Fabián Alonso waited for her to come out, and he looked her full in the face in the fading twilight, when she made her appearance against the dark background of the threshold.

"A fine girl!" exclaimed the old man.

He had already started on his way to complete his rounds when he turned back suddenly to say:

"Did you know Fermín Paz down there?"

"Uncle Fermín, a relative of ours, who lives at La Coruña?"

"The same."

"Yes, I know him."

"He is a son-in-law of mine."

"May he continue to be for many years," courteously replied Mariflor, tearing open the envelope

with a pin. The postman made his horse give another half turn, and then he disappeared wearily down the road into the turbid horizon.

A note trembled in the slender fingers of the girl.

"Is it from your father?" impatiently asked Ramona.

"It is—" said the girl, flushing at seeing the signature, "from a gentleman who came on the same train we did."

"And he writes to you?"

"He promised that he would write to us."

"Did you know him before?"

"I met him then."

Ramona became serious, somewhat disapproving. She was a harsh woman, strong and forbidding; she was barely forty years old, and if she had ever possessed any beauty she no longer retained the slightest trace of it; her breasts were shriveled, and her features withered; her body was dry and hard; she was tall and gaunt, and she inspired Florinda with an unutterable terror.

Not knowing what attitude to adopt, holding the letter in her hands, the girl was slowly making her way down the hall. Gaining her room, standing on a chair to catch the fading light from the high window, she read the note, which began in prose with much gallantry, and ended with a verse, enamored and subtle. It proceeded in this manner:

"CHARMING MARIFLOR: Do you remember our sweet friendship? Do you remember our sad parting? A week has passed since then, and still I can scarcely believe in the reality of that delightful meeting, or of that cruel separation. Was it reality or fantasy? Love takes advan-

tage of both of these to compel us to succumb. Great loves are the discovery in reality of the creatures of the imagination.

"I first found Mariflor asleep, and it still seems to me, when I close my eyes, that I can see her sleeping, that I can sense her dreaming. You and the sun appeared at the same moment that divine morning of our journey; for although the dawn of day was so beautiful, I saw that you were much more lovely than the dawn. Blessed be that dream, and blessed the journey that made it possible for me to enjoy so splendid a dawn! What a noble symbol! Life is a journey and a dream; love is an awakening, a dawn.

"And to live again what has been dreamed and promised! Perhaps instead of a discovery it may be only a recognition. Your image is reproduced in my memory as the likeness of another image: that of a girl I saw on the beach at Vigo years ago, and who, by reason of some strange suggestion, I have never been able to forget. Write and tell me whether you remember having seen me before; whether you have a presentiment that we shall soon see each other again. I will write you often, if you will allow me; I will send you many verses; I will come some day to Valdecruces.

"Our friendship is not new, I am sure of that; your name, your voice, and your face, arouse in my soul the recollection of another sweet interview, the unforgettable sensation of another happy meeting.

"Perhaps one day during our bright and glorious youth
You looked upon me as you passed, as might a sister—
Was it not really you, that lovely maid, in truth,
Dusky-eyed and gypsylike,
Who kissed me on the forehead, and on my golden locks
Placed your snowy hands?

"Do you not remember? Laughing, you did say to me
As you gave me that sweet kiss: What is your name?

"And as I listened to the gentle melody
Of your dear request, my soul rose as if on wings;
I felt myself blinded by emotion, as the story
Of my reed ceased, and it changed to an arrow quiver.
"And a clear voice wafted through the air repeated:
"I am young love that passes,
The stripling love whom you shall meet some distant day
After grievous trials and tempests of your soul."

The waning light flickered over the final phrase with such feebleness that Mariflor read the name of the poet only with her thoughts, slowly closing her eyes which had been tormented during the reading by the lack of illumination. Then beneath her heavy eyelashes her pupils began to see visions, and in some remote place they followed the figure of a laughing blond-haired boy, with his wings and his quiver like the god of love: was it Rogelio Terán? Was it an ingenuous image conceived by fantasy, some recollection mysteriously brought to earth from some other forgotten and obscure existence? Would the traveler ever return to take Mariflor away with him?

In the clear light of these firm illusions the vision of a pair of blue eyes, thoughtful and ardent, persisted. Mariflor was convinced that she had seen them from the depths of her soul, not only once, but many times throughout the course of her life; perhaps in the gentle face of a blond boy, in the daring countenance of the young sailor lad who had looked at her for so many days on the quay at La Coruña, or in the manly countenance of the stranger, the artist who had spoken to her words of love and of

sorrow with such charming grace one morning; where had she seen those clear, deep eyes before?

"Are you here?" asked Marinela, slowly entering the room.

Florinda thrust the letter into her bodice and extended her hand to her cousin, answering negligently:

"I was here——"

"How dark it is! I can't see you."

Then Mariflor concealed herself playfully so that her cousin should seek her, until finally the child, shaking her gently, murmured contentedly:

"You can't frighten me, no indeed!" And her girlish voice assumed a grave accent in order to announce: "Don Miguel is here; he has come to see you."

The warm southwest wind was whistling over the plain, folding its sonorous clothing, beating its garments against the walls of the house and garden; the straw on the roofs spread its uncombed golden hair over the eaves.

In the little parlor, Aunt Dolores and Ramona were courteously receiving the priest of Valdecruces, while Olalla was in the kitchen giving the boys their supper. The door leading to the yard was open as in summer, and the oil lamp, which had been lighted in honor of the priest, was burning, sheltered from the wind.

In the uncomfortable and rickety rustic armchair placed near the couch sat Don Miguel-Fidalgo. He was a young and fine-looking priest; he had recently terminated his studies, and had been given the parish

of Valdecruces until such time as he could be placed in a more lucrative one, where his talents, which were many and rare, might have larger opportunities.

This young man had taken his course of studies in that famous seminary where unusual preëminence in sacred letters is acquired: he had been a student at Villanoble, whose courses of lectures, according to bishops and theologians, equal the celebrated schools of Rome.

Don Miguel had kindly, large brown eyes, the color of cinnamon. He was not one of those timid priests who look at women sidewise with uncontrollable diffidence, frequently interpreted by cynical men as hypocrisy; he looked young girls and old women directly in the eyes, while his own remained serene and very gentle; he spoke to them with affection, with a mixture of sadness and profound compassion, and his phrase of encouragement, as well as his penetrating glance, enjoyed the privilege of restraining the pacific waters of gentleness as within a pool, in the wild and desolate expanse of those feminine hearts. Like his eyes, every line of his face and bearing, as well as his name of Fidalgo, proclaimed the gentlemanliness of Don Miguel.

As Mariflor entered the little parlor the priest looked at her very deliberately, and his limpid eyes pondered much over the anxiety revealed by those of the girl, which now filled with subtle astonishment, or again revealed impatience and vague uncertainty, and were ever feverish and glowing, whether quiet or restless. The eyes of this girl left the priest somewhat perplexed.

The conversation ran on affectionately and quietly, during which the priest asked the new arrival many questions, drawing out the information that the girl liked Valdecruces, although everything looked to her rather depressing; that she was expecting to hear good news of her father almost any day, and that she looked upon her stay in the pueblo as of a provisional character, and unlikely to continue long.

This last Florinda did not express clearly, nor perhaps did she think it in a definite and reasoned manner. It was a hope which her ingenuous chatter allowed to shine through the short periods of silence. Her words were accompanied by invisible threads of allusion to distant, happy vistas. The audacious flashing of her eyes bespoke a tumult of visions like those dark and rushing waters of northern rivers, where on peaceful nights the clouds, the moon, and the stars sometimes suddenly seem to set forth on a mad gallop through the sky.

The priest, noticing these recondite features, did not seem to be absolutely unaware that restraining banks and fissures in the human heart usually agitate or quiet the silent waters of sentiment before they peep forth through the eyes, however imaginative and warm; if he did not guess that Florinda had a love letter concealed in her bodice, he was not far from suspecting it.

She, on her part, learned how that uncle of hers who had been taken sick with pains in his chest at Villanoble had studied in the seminary with Don Miguel, and as they had both been born in the same Castilian region, the youthful friendship which they

established had endured between the family of the dead student and him who in the course of time came to be the priest of Valdecruces. And then, with increasing emotion, the thought came into her mind that this smiling and affable priest undoubtedly knew the appealing blue eyes, now so far away, and this brought a smile to her lips.

Olalla entered with a heavy step, turning her head in order to say:

"Come! Say good evening to the company!"

The boys, overcome with timidity, came lagging behind her, dragging their feet.

Pedro, the elder, came last, with bent head and flaming cheeks; he was a youngster of thirteen years of age, robust and shy, without the slightest trace of malice in his blue eyes; his features were ordinary, his skin sunburned, and his hair blond; but an expression of gentleness ennobled his face when he smiled.

The two younger ones also entered with bent heads, the right hand of each hesitating between mouth and nose. The mother gave first one and then the other a slap on their offending fingers, obliging them to raise their heads. With overwhelming timidity they revealed their eyes, which changed from light gray to faded blue; the lines of their faces were common like those of Pedro; their hair was thick and golden; their complexion healthful and swarthy, while their timid smile revealed a charming candor.

All three were dressed shabbily and the boys wore no trace of the regional costume. The girl had on a red petticoat reaching to her ankles, such as was

worn by the women of the country for their work in the field; a gray bodice and an apron of cretonne; a kerchief hung down her back, intended, no doubt, to cover her head.

"Oh, yes, I have heard something about you," said the priest, patting them on the head. "I've been told that you sing the hymn of the Sacred Heart very nicely."

The little faces of Carmen and Tomás were once more turned away, and their picking fingers returned to their former activity. Ramona's slaps were repeated again; she seemed to be determined that the children should speak to Don Miguel, and look him directly in the face, "As God commands," she said. But Carmen would not even so much as say, "This mouth is mine," and the younger boy burst into tears.

"Stupid! Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" said the mother, shaking him vigorously. "Is it manly for you to bawl like that?"

While the priest in his most conciliating manner declared that little Tomás and Carmen were marvelously fine singers, and that in the month of June they would be taking their place in the church choir, singing with the other school children, Olalla bent over her brother until she almost sank to her knees on the floor; she drew him to her, dried his tears and wiped his face, and whispered a promise into his ear.

"Me, too?" murmured Carmen softly.

"Both of you," asserted the sister, encircling the little girl's waist with her other arm.

Mariflor, seeing both the innocent little heads

nestling so affectionately against Olalla's breast, suddenly recalled that gentle caress in which the young pigeon lost a tuft of feathers.

"They're going to sing for you," announced Olalla gayly. She placed the children with their faces turned toward the wall, while no one except the newcomer seemed to be surprised at this peculiar position. Thus they sang, gazing at the floor, their backs turned to the audience; their youthful voices, trembling with bashfulness and humility, were filled with a tender sentiment extolling the Divine Heart of Jesus. The hymn resembled a timid supplication rather than a song of praise as it rolled forth with the childish accents.

The priest turned to Mariflor to explain:

"The children around here are so bashful that they always sing or recite without allowing their faces to be seen."

Silent with astonishment and with emotion Mariflor nodded her head, with a vague smile on her lips, and in the bright eyes of Don Miguel the image of this feminine sensitiveness, so unusual in the parlor of tía Dolores, was reflected as in a mirror.

Nevertheless, the heart of another girl in the same room was thrilling with tenderness, but her thoughts were guarded with such sacred reserve that neither in her expression nor in her smile were Marinela's inward emotions revealed in her face; and the promptness with which the priest turned toward her, seeking the feverish trace of that spirit in the latent waves of sentiment, was truly suggestive.

The children had now sung the last verse of their song and had said good night in stifled voices; the

three kissed the hand of the priest and went off to bed escorted by Olalla.

The old grandmother sat huddled on a bench, her arms swinging at her sides and her head bent forward swaying to the rhythm of a gentle snore. Ramona had bowed her head with an air of devotion at the sound of the hymn.

The priest, his eyes fixed on Marinela, asked:

"What have you to say to me?"

"Nothing, sir," the girl solemnly responded. But the mother gave a sudden sniff and hastened to say:

"You must give her a good scolding, Don Miguel; just see how she is growing thinner and more dejected all the time; and she seems to be more troubled every day, just as if she had been bewitched!"

"Why, I am all right!" stammered the lass in confusion.

"Tell her she is lying," Ramona continued, rising to her feet in a harsh and rustic attitude, pointing to the young girl, who shrank back into her corner in timidity. "Tell her that the freedom of her ways is going to cost her very dear; now that she is over fifteen, and we can't take her out of school without having her cry; and she doesn't know how to do a thing but make foolish knick-knacks of flowers and lace; when her day comes to get married she won't have the grit to manage a house with all its tasks and duties, and as for going out to work in the fields——"

"That will not be necessary," interrupted the priest blandly.

"It looks to me that it will," replied the mother;

and then with less anger and more sorrow she added: "Those walks to Piedralbina do her harm, sir; her food in the lunch box gets too dry, and she comes home in the afternoon sweating and worn out as if she were going to die. Look how she is running down; little Carmica comes very near amounting to as much as she does right now!"

It was true; the poor girl was so undeveloped and slender that she seemed to be bending beneath the burden of a chronic debility, and the pallor of her cheeks gave the pathetic impression of those delicate roses that wait only till the night wind strips their petals. Her light Celtic eyes were almost green, and possessed deep tints like waters of changing hues that reflect the varying shades of the foliage. The oval of her face was perfect, and lent an angelic sweetness to her features, which, although not fine, were harmonious; they were accentuated by the strange expression of her smile, which, bitter and sweet at the same time, was unusual on lips so childish and so frank. The crude dress of the Maragatan women seemed to oppress and overburden her delicate form, and to distort her hips with its thick folds; beneath the kerchief bound around her forehead her heavy hair, ruddy as gold, seemed to sway like ripened wheat; all her incipient maidenhood possessed a mournful air of thwarted development, an inexorable sadness repressing the stimulus of youth.

"I would be only too glad if I were able to give her light bread and dainties of that sort," said Ramona, in a voice which at the same time denoted both harshness and sorrow. "I would be only too

glad to let her do whatever she wishes; but here at home, despite all our poverty, she would have more rest and better care, hot soup, pleasant shade—see, she's so sad and so forlorn she already looks like the other girl who took sick just when she was fifteen, too."

Ramona strode across the room to Marinela and raised her bowed head with her hand.

The priest, wishing to ease the troubled mind of the mother, said with subtle flattery:

"The one she resembles most is her cousin Mariflor."

"That one has been raised in a wholly different manner," replied Ramona with a certain air of bitterness.

Don Miguel, rising to take his leave, extracted from the two girls the promise that on the following Sunday, after High Mass, they would come to see him; he needed to talk a great deal with Marinela, and he also had something to say to Florinda.

The old grandmother bustled about, muttering a few devout phrases; she spoke to the priest with extreme respect, as if she had not known him when he was merely a young student in the seminary.

Olalla returned in response to her mother's call, and all together they escorted the guest as far as the gate of the corral nearest to the house of the priest.

The night was warm, and a threat of storm vibrated in the air; the strong and fragrant breeze was laden with wild perfumes wrested in its way over the rolling heath from the orchards in full bloom, from the plowed ground opened in furrows of hope, or fertile in the belated gestation of the

golden wheat. In the arch of the fleecy sky shone a star.

As he was taking his leave and while the heavy door was being opened, Don Miguel asked with a slight display of anxiety if they had received any news from Buenos Aires.

"We haven't heard a word," said the three women in chorus.

"When my father arrives he will write to us frequently," added Florinda hopefully.

"Yes; Señor Martín will be sure to set our minds at ease," said the priest kindly, from the other side of the threshold. And his cape, swollen by the wind in the darkness, enwrapped the young cleric in a black cloud as he made his way down the road.

Florinda's ear having now become accustomed to the intense silences of Valdecruces, could detect subdued sounds in the house the next morning when the light of dawn penetrated the tiny window of her little room; a short time before a cock had greeted the new day with a strident crow, and a bell had rung.

She dressed herself with extreme diligence and ventured bravely forth through the dim light of the hall. Upon seeing her enter the kitchen, Olalla asked in amazement:

"But why did you get up so early?"

"I couldn't sleep, and I wanted to speak to you as soon as possible."

"To speak to me?"

"Yes; so that you will tell me a great many things I wish to know."

"What things?"

"Wait a minute."

There was a grave resolution in the restrained manner of Florinda, whose braids were hanging down her back, her bodice half unbuttoned, and a light pallor caused by sleeplessness on her cheeks. She listened intently to a piercing cry which sounded in the direction of the barnyard: "*Pulas! Pulas!*"

"It is my mother calling the chickens to give them their feed," said Olalla.

"Is she not going to Mass with grandmother now?"

"When the second bell rings."

As if in response to this suggestion, the bronze church bell began to peal at the same moment that a cock gave another crow, and the grandmother's weary old clock began to moan, striking five deep notes.

The door of the little parlor opened and a massive form was outlined in the dim light: it was Chosca who was looking for her apron and her kerchief on the bench between a coverlet and a packsaddle where she slept during the night.

Promptly after this the three women started on their way to the church; and no sooner had Mariflor heard them leave the house than she said to her cousin, who stood waiting, eager with curiosity:

"Tell me, is it true that we haven't money with which to give Marinela light bread? Is it true that we are as poor as your mother says? That we have to go out to work in the fields like the most unfortunate of creatures?"

"Unfortunate?—light bread?" repeated Olalla, with a forced and rather stupid smile.

"Don't laugh, tell me if we are really so unfortunate as all that!"

"With all of us enjoying good health——" the country girl began to argue ambiguously.

"But Marinela does not enjoy good health."

"Nor my father, either; and it is over three years since he has sent us any money. The mortgaged property is all falling into the hands of tío Cristóbal—— Almost nothing of what you see belongs to us any more."

"Not even the house?"

"The house—belongs to us as yet. But I don't know how much we owe on it."

"I have come here under a false impression," murmured Mariflor in anguish. "Of course I knew that grandmother had become rather poor, but I had no idea that things were as bad as they are. Neither did my father realize it; he does not want us to go out to work in the field; he left some money for us."

The girl clung tenaciously to the idea of assistance from her father, rebelling against the harsh facts of an unkind fate; and she listened with alarm to the confession of her cousin.

"When you came, grandmother gave all of it to tío Cristóbal."

"All of it?"

"Yes, and still there was not enough to pay off the interest on the debt."

"My father will send more at once," repeated the girl, credulous and fervent.

"But in the meantime——" lamented Olalla, as

if having been suddenly excited to cruelty she would not give the slightest credence to such illusions.

Realizing that tears were rolling down her cheeks, Mariflor covered her face with her slender, trembling hands.

"You are crying?" said the village girl gloomily. "You won't have to suffer; you will escape at once from this wretched situation."

As Mariflor made no response, she added persuasively:

"You will have a husband who is very well off."

"A husband?"

"Aren't you going to be married this summer?"

"I? Marry who?"

"Who do you suppose, girl?"

"No, no; you are mistaken!"

"But aren't you and Antonio engaged?"

"Why I don't even know him."

"He is your cousin, child."

"That makes no difference to me."

"He is generous and good looking."

"I don't care for him."

"What is that you're saying?"

"Just what you hear. Olalla, listen to me, I have fallen in love with a poet."

The blue eyes dilated in amazement, while Mariflor dried her tears and said, with a brilliant glow in her eyes:

"He is a young gentleman who came up here on the train with us."

"Did you know him before?" asked Olalla, just as Ramona had done.

"I met him then. Yesterday I received a letter from him; did your mother tell you?"

"Not a word."

"Well, she was right there when it was handed to me, and I thought she seemed to be annoyed with me; perhaps I ought to show it to her. But I'm afraid to; your mother doesn't like me very well."

"Yes, child, she likes you; that is the way she is. She lost her kindly disposition with the death of her children and the ruin of the farm."

"And do we owe much to Uncle Cristóbal?" asked Mariflor, again overcome by grief.

"We gave him the house as security for the last loan, and we have not yet paid him all the interest on the payments. Grandmother still has in her own name six and a half acres, two yokes of oxen, the garden, and the orchard."

"How little, my heavens!"

"If only they would send more money from *over there*."

"Yes; it will come," assured Florinda with faith. "But this idea occurs to me: why did you not turn to Antonio rather than to Uncle Cristóbal?"

"Because Antonio's father, Uncle Bernardo, is dead, and the widow, as you know, is stingy and she doesn't like us; she wants to marry her son off to a girl who has money, and she thinks that you have property; so if she should find out that we are all poor! After you are married, it will be a different thing."

"But I'm not going to marry Antonio!" repeated Florinda, with the energy of her resolute will, frowning heavily.

"Are you speaking the truth? Are you going to mate with an outsider?"

"With some one I can care for with all my heart!"

"No doubt he is a rich landholder," suggested Olalla with an air of prudence.

"I don't know, and I don't care whether he is or not! There is an expression on his face that penetrates to the heart, and he knows how to write books."

"Romances?"

"Books of every kind."

"That sounds like some sort of mimicry," murmured the country girl with disdain.

"I don't understand you."

"A sort of a clown, one of those that play mimics over there," and Olalla's scornful gesture seemed to overspread an extended range, as if she were trying to take in the world that extended outside the region of the Maragatos.

"What do you know about it?" argued Mariflor, disdainfully also. But suddenly she repressed her pride, and moaned with despair: "Help me, Olalla, for mercy's sake!"

Her cousin did not move. She shrugged her shoulders in an absorbed manner, as if she did not understand this earnest and pleading language.

"Olalla, don't forsake me!" begged Mariflor, with clasped hands.

"Why not, lass?"

"Don't you be angry with me, too; but you must never again speak of my marrying Antonio!"

"In that case, then, it is you who forsake us!"

"How can that be?"

"Why, with the marriage," said Olalla, with a sudden outburst of logical and persuasive eloquence, "grandmother's situation would be bettered, would be saved, and ours as well; we would all escape from this grinding poverty."

"My father will save us," interrupted Florinda.

"That is what my father wanted to do, that is why he went away, and you can see for yourself how it is! And with that treacherous idea of yours —why, we'll have to call in the conjuror to take the curse of being bewitched off us! Your cousin Antonio," she added, noticing the perturbation of the rebellious girl, "would keep you like the wife of the viceroy. You would have no end of money to handle!"

"Has he so much?" asked Mariflor mechanically.

"An abundance of capital that astounds one!"

"Then if he is so rich, and if he is good, he would want to help us in spite of his mother—even if I do marry some one else. I will ask him myself; I will ask him on my knees!"

Olalla shook her head in doubt.

"He is a very correct and gentlemanly young man," she declared, "but if you break off the marriage, you will leave us without a roof over our heads!"

"Marry him yourself!" exclaimed Mariflor.

"My parents have not made any contract with his; he doesn't like me," said Olalla, in a low voice and with a flushed face.

Through the painful silence that ensued between the two young girls, the ringing of a bell vibrated its metallic tremor.

"Half past five!" stammered Olalla almost with alarm. "I must make the fire and get breakfast."

With a sudden impulse she turned toward the hearth, but Mariflor held her back, putting her arm about her waist, and, looking into her eyes with indescribable anxiety, she implored again:

"Do not forsake me! You can help me a great deal! Have pity on me!"

"And you," replied the country girl, "will you have pity on us?" R1345

"Yes, I give you my word; I will work with you, I will do whatever you command me; I will be strong and resigned."

"But—how about the marriage?"

"To my cousin? No, no! I will seek the salvation of the farm in some other way, if what you may lose depends upon me; I want to help you in every way possible; and you in exchange will be the protectress of my love, won't you?"

The honey-colored pupils rested with so much sweetness on the blue eyes, Florinda's voice pleaded with such inflections of tenderness and vehemence, that Olalla, incredulous still, relented slightly.

"You would not be able to do anything in any other way!"

"Yes, yes—I will work a miracle."

"How deeply in love you are, child!" exclaimed the country girl, smiling at last.

"Now you are over being angry! How dearly I love you! Now you are my friend again, my sister; how happy I am, in spite of everything!"

Mariflor, with her eyes full of tears and her lips smiling, added in an intimate whisper:

"I will show you the letter; you will see what lovely writing it is."

"I must make the fire," insisted her cousin.

"After a while we will read it over together on the quiet. Now, give me some order; come, what do you want me to do?"

"No, child; you must pretty yourself up for High Mass."

"And so must you; but first I must do something worth while, something that will help you. What can I do? Tell me!"

In the presence of such fervent insistence, Olalla conceded:

"Go up and feed the pigeons."

When Mariflor started to run, pleased at the commission, Olalla insinuated timidly:

"The dung has to be cleaned out of the nests and off the floor and the roosts."

"I'll do everything, everything in just a jiffy," responded the sweet voice from a distance.

But Florinda's task was not fulfilled as promptly, nor with the accuracy promised, for no sooner had she gained the dovecote than she experienced an impelling hunger for air and light, and she climbed up to satiate herself by looking down from the window. The pigeons had not forgotten her, as they cooed a welcome. Mariflor extended both her arms to them, carried away by a mad impulse of love, at once both sad and happy, overflowing with anguish and with hope. All the misfortunes of the family rose in a tempestuous wave to dash against her poor heart, impassioned and ardent. Exalted by the new sentiment harbored within it, the girl

eagerly accepted the idea that her destiny in this house was that of a redeemer; she imagined that God had placed in her delicate hands the tiller of the family ship, which was drifting rudderless in the poverty of the land. Lavishing upon the gentle pigeons the embraces intended for her nascent love, she believed in the miracle which she hoped would emerge triumphant from her rash enterprise. Again the dim silhouette of a strange Don Quixote, wearing eyeglasses and carrying a quiver, appeared upon the field of fantasy, to offer liberation, peace, and good fortune to the girl in a message that began thus: "Charming Mariflor——"

The repeated tap, tap of a cane against the ground and the hacking of a little cough down the road aroused the girl from her dreams, and rising higher yet in her observatory, she saw tía Gertrudis go hobbling past; she was an old woman with the reputation of being a witch, the first person outside of the family whom Mariflor had seen in Valdecruces. It was the same afternoon on which Olalla had announced that visitors were coming in the evening; scarcely had a vigorous knock sounded on the door than it was opened, and when a person standing on the threshold asked in a halting voice for the stranger, a stifled exclamation of alarm had greeted tía Gertrudis.

"It's the witch," whispered the children into Florinda's ear; "she dries up the mother's milk, and gives the evil eye to the young girls."

"You mustn't say that, it's a sin," protested Marinela, turning pale in spite of herself.

And Olalla, with a frowning face and hostile air, brought the call to a close as promptly as possible.

Before the old woman had taken her leave, after having asked Mariflor many questions, she approached closely to look her full in the face.

"In order to do you harm," murmured Pedro.

"Because she is nearly blind," excused Marinela.

And the little old woman, nearsighted and deaf, bent with age, and gasping for breath, muttered a tremulous farewell in the dark hollow of her toothless mouth.

After she had disappeared, Marinela told that when tía Gertrudis was a girl she had wanted to marry grandfather Juan, and as he and his people disdained her and she never found a husband, they began to say that she had given them the evil eye by way of vengeance; that because of this tío Juan's children had died, and even his grandchildren were taken down with consumption, in this region where the terrible disease had scarcely ever been known before.

"All that happened to the cattle, and the failure of the crops, too, is her fault," added Pedro rancorously.

And Marinela repeated gently:

"Don Miguel says it is a sin to believe that; he says that only in jest may one talk of witchcraft. Tía Gertrudis," added the girl with kindly eulogy, "does not mix into the affairs of anybody; she is so poor and so old! But she knows tales of ghosts, of princes and of saints, and when the people gather together of a winter evening to sew or to spin, she entertains the young folks very much."

Florinda recalled all this as the old woman stumped past, and while the tack, tack of her staff grew fainter as she disappeared down the street, the recollections of all the misfortunes hurled by fate upon the descendants of tío Juan crowded into the girl's mind—the poverty, the exile, the illnesses, the deaths.

That first visit she had received in Valdecruces, in the dim twilight, accompanied by insidious glances and obscure phrases, Mariflor recalled now as an augury which made her shudder. She turned her eyes away from the hostile shadow that could still be seen limping down the road, and searched the horizon in quest of some more auspicious image.

A violet mist was floating down from the sky or was rising from the untilled fields, obliterating boundaries and distances, presenting a strong resemblance to the fogs of a marine landscape on the dark and cloudy mornings of days of storm.

Repelled by the chill of that resemblance, Florinda again sought the longed-for glow of happiness within her own soul; and spilling out her overwhelming exaltation in a delirium of phrases, she addressed a tender discourse to the handsome pigeons, to the brotherly wind, and to the sun as to an absent father.

In the flow of chatter gurgling from the red lips as from a river of honey, were mixed improvisations directed not to the breeze, nor to the light, nor to the birds; words indecisive, hesitant, in which the enamored voice would become silent and then would speak again, trying to compose a portion of an ingenuous, rambling epistle:

"'My dear sir——' (No, that is too mild.) 'Never to be forgotten friend——' (That is too strong.) 'Esteemed——' (Ugh, how common! I will decide upon the beginning later.) 'I received your letter——' (Very good; that is all easy enough. Then): 'It seems to me that I did meet a handsome boy with blue eyes and blond hair in Vigo once; he had tiny wings and carried arrows, and we exchanged a kiss; but I think it was during a carnival! At any rate, I am sure I have seen you before somewhere; I will try to remember where. It was a great pleasure to receive your letter, and you may come whenever you wish. There is a priest here who studied in Villanoble and whom you doubtless know; his name is Miguel Fidalgo. Your verses are perfectly charming. I will write more another time. Believe me your sincere friend——'"

After her perplexities and fears, her face began to glow with joy and hope.

As the mist suddenly cleared, the sun rose glowing over the plain like a gigantic communion wafer upon a colossal altar.

CHAPTER VII

THE SERFS OF THE SOIL

"THE crossroads" is a central point of the region where unite four broad and silent roads lined with crumbling thatched-roof houses, as gray and poverty-stricken as the soil, and as lonely as the road; a great rudely hewn cross set in the ground and surrounded by the remnant of a fence justified the name of the forlorn and silent little square.

Early one blue-and-white morning in the month of April Mariflor passed by here. She was dressed in the same bright costume she had worn when she arrived at Valdecruces a few weeks before; but her shoes were not so fine as those she wore then, nor was the kerchief crossed over her breast so handsome.

She was walking along very diligently beside her grandmother who belied her "three twenties and ten years more" as she was used to say, by keeping pace with vigorous tread to the firm and agile steps of the younger woman.

Just as they had taken one of the four crossroads, a young peasant lad made his appearance down another one; his head was bowed and he was walking along indolently, whistling a native air.

"It is Rosicler, grandmother dear," announced the girl.

The old woman raised her voice and shortened her steps to say to him:

"God keep you!"

"Good morning, tía Dolores and her companion," replied the youth. He stopped short, embarrassed and flushed, with an evident desire to add something more to the salutation.

He was a Maragatan youth of about seventeen, spare, of medium height, with blue eyes, sunburned face, and ingenuous mouth. He was gentle by nature, happy of disposition, calm of spirit, and sound of heart; he was called Rosicler because ever since infancy he had been smiling and courteous.

"You're up very early," he said after a moment of vacillation, which brought a smile to the lips of the young girl.

"No, not very early, for it is now eight o'clock," replied the old woman, and she added affably: "Where are you going, son? Have you left your sheep all alone?"

"Yes, señora; I'm on my way to the master to ask him for orders. But I will be back at once; if you are on your way to the plowed grounds I'll catch up with you in a minute."

"Very well, lad, hurry; yes, we are on our way to the plowed fields."

The shepherd boy stood still for an instant, his fascinated eyes fixed upon Florinda's; and then he began to run so swiftly that he had no time to hear the young girl's merry laugh.

Tía Dolores placed a rigid finger upon her lips in sign of silence, and reproved her gently, somewhat scandalized:

"Child, don't laugh like that!"

"But, grandmother, is the village square a graveyard? May not one laugh in Valdecruces?"

"Not so loud, no, I have told you before. It doesn't look well for the women in the land of the Maragatos to make a noise."

"Well, certainly the men don't make any noise here; since there's no one here but Rosicler, the priest, the sacristan, the gravedigger, and three or four old dotards."

"Yes, of course; no one stays in the place except the old men, the women, and the young folks!" sighed tía Dolores.

The street came to an end between the fences of the parched gardens, and the road, suddenly opening toward a vast horizon, revealed the gray lands stirred by recent plowing, lying open and deserted, with here and there the scarlet clump of a few poppies trembling between the clods; a soft and gentle breeze kissed the plain in silent peace.

The two women had walked on for quite a distance when Rosicler caught up with them, dashing down the road with his cap in his hand and his face flaming.

"Tío Cristóbal didn't let me go as soon as I thought he would," he murmured; "he was still sleeping when I reached the house."

"No doubt he feels his years a great deal now; he is going on ninety-six," said the little old grandmother, drawing herself erect with youthful vigor at the venerable suggestion of one having lived for so many years.

She and the country swain, both of them ex-

perienced, and at the same time humbled, in the hardships of the eternal problem of their rude life, talked on.

"I had to see him about the sheepfold, you understand?" explained Rosicler. "I have to move the fence, and I wanted to ask tío Cristóbal in what direction he wanted me to let the cote run."

"And have you had any letter from over there?"

"No letter, nor any message. My brother promised me that in the month of St. Peter, when the contract was to be closed, everything would be ready for me to embark."

"There is still time."

"But it is four months now since he wrote a word."

"I am waiting for a letter, too—always waiting!"

"From Señor Martín, you mean?"

"From the only two sons I have left. Isidro is not in very good health," said the old woman with self-pity.

"My father is there to take care of him now," said Florinda.

"Your father was so depressed when he went away!"

The girl lowered her head, murmuring:

"But he is very hopeful."

A deep silence seemed to flow along the ground; the newly risen sun glowed brightly in the east, reddening the horizon, and far in the distance rose the silhouette of Mount Teleno, pale and dim, like a fluttering strip of mist or cloud. From that side the destructive tempests came to Valdecruces, the fateful thunderstorms of summer. When she raised

her head, Florinda gazed in that direction while her grandmother pressed the corner of her apron against her eyes, and Rosicler said:

"To-day the boat anchors at Vigo. Perhaps we will have a letter."

The road had grown narrower, being encroached upon by the clods of newly plowed earth; faint paths, fugitive and dim, led mysteriously off into the plain, destitute of vegetation and of perfume. Here and there along the trail an occasional colorless bush, parched and bristling with thorns, rising as if abashed in the vernal light, would offer the possibility of a stumble.

The three travelers gained a ridge where a woman was bravely goading her yoke of cows, while she plodded along the furrows gasping for breath.

"God help you," they called to her in the usage of the land.

And she, in a like manner, responded:

"You are welcome."

"Are those cows yours, Aunt Dolores?" asked the boy.

"And they're yours, also."

"They work very well under the yoke! Just look at their hides! There is not a finer pair in Valdecruces."

"Yes there is, lad, for Uncle Cristóbal's are more sleek and glossy."

"But not like these," flattered the little shepherd warmly.

And his devout phrases rested upon Mariflor with ingenuous candor. Gratified and smiling, she asked him:

"So you want to emigrate too?"

"Yes. You know that one earns very little as a shepherd."

"But do you say '*you*' when talking to her?" intervened tía Dolores. "Why, your grandfather and hers were brothers!"

"But as I don't know her very well——"

"What does that matter?" said the girl. "You see that I speak to you with the frankness of relatives. So tell me, how much do you earn?"

"A dollar a year for each twelve ewes, my keep, and some clothing."

"And is the flock large?"

"It is smaller than usual this year."

"Where have you got it pastured?"

"See it over there."

And the shepherd indicated a place on the flat landscape that seemed chimerical to Florinda.

"I can't see anything but sky and land," murmured the girl, rolling up her eyes and making a shade with her hands.

"See it, see it over there," persisted Rosicler, dropping into the native dialect because of the very vigor and conciseness of the regional words. With his arm extended toward the eastern end of the horizon, he traced a firm and ample gesture that seemed to point out each animal, and to give it shelter; to protect it and to bless it.

"But, no, I can't see them!" lamented the girl, making an effort to distinguish the outline of the flock. "Now!" she exclaimed suddenly. "Now I see them! Exactly; there they are; those white tufts moving about over there! Why, in this sea

of land your sheep look like the foam—the crests of the waves. And to carry out the idea still further, the sail of a ship looms up over there between the waves. See, Rosicler!"

"But that is my bed!" replied the shepherd lad, with a merry laugh.

"What, your bed? But do you sleep in a balloon there in the middle of the plain?"

Rosicler continued laughing at the girl's amazement and at her ignorance in matters pertaining to the couches of shepherds; and as the woman who had been plowing suspended her chattering, tía Dolores good-naturedly hastened to give an explanation, eloquent with detail, of the everyday artifice by which that poor bed that Mariflor had taken to be a marvelous floating couch, like those she had read about in the adventures of Don Quixote, had been constructed.

"Nothing of the kind, little one; it's a sort of long-legged frame with a platform; something like a litter, you understand? That thing that you can see more clearly, a kind of whitish thing, that looks to you like the sail of a boat, is a sort of shed to give the boy shelter from the wind and rain."

The Maragatan woman spoke with firmness, giving a pleasant and solemn intonation to the key of the small secret, resting her turbid eyes on the girl, and addressing her persuasive conversation to her, as if initiating her into the secrets of the region, like one revealing the rites of a cult to a neophyte. She did not seem to be that same old woman seen before on the train, hesitant and brooding, silent and

dull, looking out upon life like a specter of former centuries.

Now, under the deep blue sky in this boundless landscape, level and rude, wild and poor, in this gray and silent path where the soil seemed like the flesh of an aged woman; here, on the crest of this harsh and solemn heath, so like an altar meant for immolation, the old Maragatan seemed glorified by a symbolic aureole, the sacred glow of a relic, the gracious melancholy of a token of the past; and, too, her weary and sterile flesh seemed to be composed of soil, of the brooding and venerable soil of Castile, tortured and heroic. It seemed as if a breeze from past ages, laden with recollections, swept invisibly over the plain, bearing a murmur of old-time deeds of gallantry, forming a distinguishing frame for the legendary figure of this woman.

Florinda listened attentively, her eyes fixed upon that white, dominant spot, like the sail of a ship; the wind-filled shelter floating above the shepherd's bed resembled that and that only.

"And do you sleep there throughout the whole year?" she asked, a note of sympathy vibrating in her voice.

"From the time the weather clears up in the spring," replied the grandmother, while the boy's face gleamed with pleasure, flattered to deserve the girl's attention.

The woman who was plowing, engrossed in her rude labor, came toiling down a furrow and passed near the group.

"Wait, Felipa!" suddenly called tía Dolores;

"I want to take a hand myself after you make the turn."

"But, grandmother dear!" protested Mariflor gently; but the grandmother, stepping out bravely between the clods of earth, was already brandishing the goad with an air of lively resolution, and she drove the animals forward with the customary cry:

"*Tuis—tuis!*"

The animals humbly obeyed, and the Maragatan woman sank the plowshare into the furrow, holding it by the handle with a firm grip; over the plowshare gushed a stream of weak red earth; the handle creaked, the animals trudged forward, and a pitiful path, along which the grain should come, lay open to the sun.

With an intelligent glance Felipa followed the wake marked in the soil by the labor. This Felipa, how old could she be?

"Forty-five at the very least," thought Mariflor, studying her out of the corner of her eye; but the woman felt the girl's curious glance, turned her indefinable countenance, blunted, tanned by the winds and the suns, and, as she smiled with pleasure displayed a perfect row of glittering white teeth which brightened her face like a ray of sunshine.

"Twenty-eight at the most," the maiden then corrected herself in surprise; and, as if, for the sake of saying something, Rosicler asked:

"Do you know how to plow?"

"No," she promptly replied.

"You'll soon learn; it's very easy."

"My father has forbidden it," she said with a

shudder, as if the shepherd boy's words were an augury. "And my grandmother has also," she added.

The youth realized that he had committed an indiscretion, and wishing to undo it by whatsoever interesting piece of news he exclaimed:

"Now my sheep have reached the higher ground."

Florinda turned and glanced in that direction, but again she could make out nothing whatever between the plain and the clouds, unable to distinguish the slightest ridge or hill; perhaps her eyes were beclouded by a gloomy mist rising from her heart.

But Rosicler pointed with insistence and exactitude: "There on the left-hand side of the sheepfold, a ridge rising at the lower end." At last Mariflor managed to make out the remote whiteness of the flock, like a cloud of silver fallen to the edge of the blue sky.

"Have you got many ewes?" Felipa asked the shepherd.

"About half and half; there's a like number of rams."

As the grandmother found the three absorbed in conversation when she completed her furrow, she continued plowing with a fine display of mettle; and by the time Mariflor noticed it and called her, she was far away, her skirt bespattered with earth, her hands tightly clutching the handle, and her back bent.

"Listen, tía Dolores! They're calling you here!" shouted the shepherd, eager to please the girl; but the old woman took heed of nothing but rounding

the return furrow; and then, after having given Felipa no few instructions, she said that it was time to continue on their way to the parcel of ground known as Ñanazales; plowing would be going on there also, and she wanted to look things over.

"And when shall I go to the Abranadillo field?" asked the plow-woman.

"The soil is too heavy yet; you'll have to wait a little."

"As soon as we have had four clear days."

"Exactly!"

"I thought you were letting that piece of ground lie fallow," said Rosicler.

"No, that was last year."

The old woman and the girl took their leave, while the youth and Felipa, standing on the edge of the plowed ground, murmured in a duo:

"May God go with you!"

"May God be with you!"

When they came into sight of the path leading to Ñanazales, Florinda, filled with curiosity, asked:

"How old is that woman, grandmother?"

After thinking it over carefully, with a deep wrinkle between her eyebrows, the old woman replied:

"She must be going on twenty-three."

"Is it possible?"

"What frightens you?"

"She looks so much older."

"She has already had two young ones."

"Then she is married?"

"Naturally, girl! At her age nearly all the lasses here have married."

"But to whom, grandmother? Why, there are no men here!"

"The young man of each one of them comes; they get married, and then he goes away again."

A curious observation leaped to the sweet lips of the girl, but she restrained it, giving to it an ingenuous turn, as she asked with the utmost candor:

"Hasn't Felipa's husband been back since they were married?"

"Why, yes, girl; didn't I tell you she had two youngsters? He comes, as do the greater part of them, for the sacramental feast; if not, how could children be born? The world would come to an end!"

Mariflor swept a sorrowful glance over the heath; the two women were now crossing a portion of fallow ground where nothing but a few lowly, useless weeds, the thwarted suggestions of a sparse vegetation, sprang up and died; the light-flooded steppe, barren and desolate, smooth and gray, silent and lifeless, produced the impression of a world that had come to an end, or of a planet bereft of humanity.

"And this land," thought the girl with terror, "is the world, the whole world, to grandmother, to Felipa, and to my cousin Olalla, to all these wretched creatures born in Valdecruces! And here the women must bear a child each year, mechanically, fearlessly, aged by brutalizing work, in order that the miserable race of slaves and emigrants will not run out."

The Maragatan girl did not reflect upon such grievances without some little knowledge of the

science of life; she knew of fruitful regions, glowing fields, happy people, enlightening books, cultured and humanitarian society. She knew that on the other side of the sterile plain there is another world, where work elevates and ennobles, where art is beauty, and love glory; where piety assumes the form of tenderness; where sorrow becomes experience, and where nature is a gentle mother.

Florinda Salvadores had seen something of the other side of life; she had lived under different and more kindly conditions; she had studied the art of feeling and loving in the school of her own home, where as a child her mother, intelligent and observing, was a teacher through love and care, and a teacher also with an honorably won diploma, the crown of a well-spent youth.

All that Mariflor could understand, and even much that she could guess, that she could foresee, and that she anticipated, along the broad highway of hope, where ambition usually pursues happiness, rose to her lips in a tremulous and anxious "Alas!"

"Are you tired?" her grandmother asked with solicitude.

"No, señora," she stammered; "I'm only thinking that these places are all very gloomy; they are so sterile and desolate."

"Mercy, child, you're easily frightened! Some of these parcels of land that you see are lying fallow for the coming year; but it is not all sterile."

"And what do you mean by lying fallow? I don't understand."

"It means land that has already produced two

crops, but the soil being poor, it can't be planted again till it has had a rest."

"My father taught me something of these things, and of the words in use around here, because he was very fond of them all."

"He taught you? Nonsense, he had almost forgotten everything himself, as he didn't marry a girl from here!"

There was a bitter note in this observation; but the old woman, promptly sweetening her words, said quite affectionately:

"We soon turn to the right, and then we'll come to Ñanazales, and you'll see ever so many fertile fields, and no end of people and yokes of oxen; it is a grain-yielding soil; on that side of the town the crops are already ripening."

"Crops of wheat?"

"No, daughter, no; of rye. Wheat doesn't grow here very well."

"And don't you ever have white bread?"

"Never." And the Maragatan woman added rather dryly: "But the black bread suits us."

"Me too," Mariflor hastened to say submissively.

The little old grandmother pondered for a moment, and then exclaimed boastfully:

"Besides, we raise barley, turnips, and, in some fields, a little bit of wheat."

The girl could not restrain another sigh at the boastful mention of such rich harvests; and so, chatting along their way about the planting, the soil, the fallow lands and the plowed ground, Mariflor saw that the recently turned earth was darker, and round about her she could make out women

and yokes of oxen, some of them working alone, others in bands.

"What are they doing, grandmother?" she asked.

"Plowing the ground over for the third time; this will be the last plowing for this season."

"And isn't there a man, not a single one, in the town, to help these poor things?"

"Why should there be, child! The only men who would think of staying here would be utterly worthless, of no use except for herding. The Maragatan men," she added, swelling up with pride, "are very clever, and they occupy themselves in other and more profitable work."

"And why don't the Maragatan women do the same?"

"The deuce! Would you have us running about the world carrying the house and the young ones on our backs? Who, then, would till the soil?"

Florinda did not venture to reply, for the rebellion struggling in her heart was almost ready to escape her lips; there before her eyes stood women and animals gasping for breath, puffing and blowing like machines, fatal, impassive, mingled as one with the implacable soil.

"Here we are in Ñanazales," said tía Dolores. "Do you see those dark-yellow oxen over there? They belong to us; they are the finest yoke in the place!"

"And the plow-woman, who is she?" asked the girl promptly.

"It's a woman you've never seen before; she's going to have a baby very soon now."

"And yet she works?"

"What should she be doing! That's the way all of us women have done."

The old grandmother drew closer to Mariflor to say:

"Look, there you have a seat; sit down and rest a minute; I want to take a look at the soil."

She trudged along the slender border where the plowing had left a soft, spongy trail which deadened her footsteps. At the head of the dark-yellow oxen stood a woman cleaning off the plowshare with the goad.

Florinda sat down on a great rock that formed a boundary mark, and as the sun was now very warm she raised the kerchief she had been wearing over her bodice above her forehead for a shade; her throat was left bare; its delicate light-hued flesh was as golden and tempting as luscious fruit. A repressed sob shook the coral beads of her red necklace, and her tear-wet face sought refuge in the corners of the kerchief.

Mariflor did not know why she was weeping, nor which one of her many sorrows had aroused this sudden storm in her breast; perhaps it was the longing for her absent parents; possibly it was due to some secret aspiration of her threatened youth, or to recollections of a happy existence which now was but a memory; all of them together, compelling and painful, aroused by the infinite gloominess of the bleak plateau, oppressed and dominated her. Who knows but that sentiments of pity and indignation over the servitude of the women of the region spoke through the tears of this noble and generous soul!

Although Florinda did not understand the reason for her impetuous grief, she yearned to cry long and bitterly, solely that she might unburden her soul; but, making a valiant effort to choke back her sobs, she dried her tears and tried to obliterate all trace of her vehement weeping.

The naturally happy girl who but a short time before had laughed so merrily in the public square at Valdecruces, greatly to the scandal of tía Dolores, almost doubted her ability to win this triumph over herself; and the mysterious impulse of rebellion became so strong that Mariflor clasped her hands in a devout attitude of supplication.

"Blessed Virgin!" she exclaimed. "Calm my rebellious spirit, even as the turbid waters of the rivers, as the wild waves of the seas——"

Just at this moment a bird concealed somewhere on the ground among the clods flew close to her feet, singing gayly. With her sudden start she frightened it away, but it flew back again still singing, well content merely to be alive, very eager for a few tiny tufts of grass that had sprung up between the stones along the roadside. In Florinda's eyes this apparition assumed the importance of a miracle, as if it were strange that a bird should be singing in springtime, nesting contentedly on the heath in the land of the Maragatos. Some chord in the memory of the disconsolate girl seemed suddenly to stir, to spring, to seek and to find the tender words she had learned in an august book:

"I am He that gives heed to the little birds, and provides for the ants, and paints the flowers, and descends even to the most humble worms——"

The tempest of tears and sighs that had been raging in tune to the violent beating of her heart subsided as by magic art, and Florinda's sorrow found relief, as if the innocent bird were a divine messenger; now, when it began to chirp and search in the stubble, she could smile, forgetting sorrow and tears.

Following the flight of the little bird her eyes chanced upon a mass of heather. She ran to welcome it as another message from the divine Artist, when she was restrained by the voice of her grandmother:

"Where are you going, lass?"

"To pick those flowers," she stammered, her voice somewhat unsteady after the recent storm in her spirit.

But the old woman gave no heed, neither did she notice the fire of passion and delirium still burning on the girl's cheeks, nor the carmine circle around her eyes; tía Dolores was worried because, according to the woman who was plowing for her, one of the oxen seemed to be sick.

"And the woman herself, how is she?" asked Florinda very anxiously.

"Who?"

"That one who is plowing for you."

"But what are you saying about her? You're crazy!"

"I only wanted to ask if she earns good wages," said the girl hesitantly, not venturing to give expression to the thought she really had in mind.

"She earns a great deal: fifteen cents a day and her keep."

"And that is a great deal! Merciful heavens," lamented the girl with terror in the depths of her soul.

She walked toward the heather absorbed in thought, while her grandmother asked, with a trace of disdain in her voice:

"Do you like the flower of the broom?"

"This is it, is it not?"

"Yes, the dark broom gives flowers too."

"Violet-colored?"

"Yes, they look as if they might be the flowers of the dead. They are the most abundant around here."

"And the poppies," added Florinda, thinking "'Flowers of tragedy!' Do you know," she said suddenly, hearing the chirping of the bird again, "I saw a quail just now."

"Nonsense, woman! It must have been a martin."

"It sings so prettily, don't you hear it? Just as if it were a lark!"

"No, little one; those come later and they nest in the green wheat; there are very few around here."

Tía Dolores hastened her steps; the sun was climbing high and Florinda might get an attack of "heat," not being accustomed to walking in the open country.

On their way back to the village, Mariflor again asked:

"Is that woman who earns fifteen cents a day a relative of ours?"

"A sort of distant cousin of your father's; a sister of Felipa, but her last name is Alonso. What

a pity that the poor thing is going to be laid up with childbirth for two or three days now! Those two women are real good help."

The shepherd's shelter seemed to be floating in the distance in the silent and deserted plain like an abandoned flag forgotten of the breeze; in some of the fields the cowbells tinkled slowly in tune with the work, and the women, all of them old in appearance, all of them sad, harassed, and gasping for breath, guided the oxen across the arable lands; occasionally the road would be crossed by the flight of a bird.

"Don't you see? They are martins," assured the old woman. "They're as tame as swallows; they come in the spring and make their nests under the overhanging roofs."

They had now reached the limits of Valdecruces, and Florinda, with the heather in her hands, turned her gaze toward the open heath. This first walk into the country of the Maragatan region had aroused an indefinable impression of anguish and sorrow.

Although her faith was reanimated by the memory of the divine Artificer "who paints the flowers and gives heed to the birds," her sorrowful eyes, serene as an autumnal dawn, turned toward the horizon.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DOUBTS OF AN APOSTLE

THE eyes of Don Miguel, shaded by his clouded forehead, were full of trouble; the priest was sitting in the seclusion of his study with his hands resting listlessly on his knees and his head bent in ceaseless meditation.

What a conflict it was! Compassion and friendship had induced him to become the adviser and guardian of the Salvadores family, but all the solicitude with which he had struggled against the involved affairs of these poor people did not suffice to forestall their hardships.

The news from America was disconcerting enough; Florinda's father, Señor Martín, as Don Miguel himself called him, had found his brother Isidoro very ill, and the modest business he had established there, which was the hope of the family, a whirlpool that had sucked up all that usury permitted.

Some slight assistance had been brought from across the sea by the second emigrant: some portion of that which with extreme deprivation had been saved from the downfall of the home on the coast. In the presence of the misfortunes that had overtaken all of those who lived upon the cruel heath, the virile resolution of Señor Martín in expatriating

himself and leaving his daughter in Valdecruces, seemed futile.

The absent Maragato confidentially wrote to the priest that he considered it a very difficult matter to put the business in America on its feet again without a great deal more money than he had brought. He also spoke of Florinda with painful anxiety, and he revealed impatience to know the state of the matrimonial negotiations between her and her cousin Antonio. "With this alliance as a base," he wrote, "perhaps it may be possible to restore the estate at Valdecruces, but I wish to leave the girl in absolute liberty to choose a husband; I am ambitious of nothing for myself; I am suffering greatly on account of her and my mother; I am extremely anxious concerning this poor invalid here and his children." And he added: "Give me your impressions. Antonio will go to Valdecruces for the sacramental feast; I believe that he still has a strong fancy for the girl; he knows that she is well educated, that she is beautiful, and both he and his mother wish to have in the family a woman of fine bearing and good breeding in order to show her off in the city. But I have no desire to deceive my nephew; if it comes in opportunely let him know that I have lost nearly everything I had at the time when we negotiated the marriage under the condition of submitting the idea to the pleasure of the girl; he knows that I have delegated all my authority in the matter to you."

Recalling the contents of the confidential letter, the priest rose nervously and walked about the little room with an air of absorption; he had received

another note, and still another, which, at once different and yet alike, converged to the same point—the marriage of Florinda.

The aspirant for her hand at Valladolid wrote to the priest telling him that, being aware of his guardianship over his cousin, he gave himself the pleasure of making known his intention of having the marriage take place that summer, taking advantage of the occasion of his trip to Valdecruces during the festival season, provided that his many business affairs should not prevent, and that it was now time for him to establish himself in life. He awaited the definite "yes" in order to carry out the consequent issues.

In the same mail, also in an envelope addressed to the *señor cura*, in a slender and nervous hand, was a letter which suddenly demanded:

"Do you not remember me? It seems to me impossible that you should have forgotten me, although you make no reply to my letters; I am he who used to write the verses and come to you with his troubles, whom you used to encourage with inspiring discourses down there on the shore of the sea, that sea of mine which you loved and which, as a great artist, you used to feel so deeply.

"I cherish never-to-be-forgotten recollections of that friendship of ours which I hope remains in your memory also; I cherish the recollection of your confidences, mystic and profound as those of a saint; ineffable visions of the peace reflected in your eyes, of the strange tenderness of your voice. After these nine years of separation I am still eager to

know the solution of the secret I could read in your soul. Do not deny it; it was a 'white' and sorrowful secret, as we say now, which I vainly endeavored to imprison within the artificial molds of a story. You never spoke, yet nevertheless that mystery lingered in my mind as an intangible chain of visions that refused to assume the form of a strophe.

"Perhaps I am doing wrong in returning to you with this memory as a device; perhaps I alarm you by suddenly bringing back the vivid recollections of my curiosity; my very frankness proves the cordiality of my impulse.

"Two years ago, upon returning from Cuba, I heard that you had graduated with high honors, and I wrote to you to your home town; later I sent you my last book; you made no response to my advances. Recently the adorable hand of a schoolgirl has written your name in a letter to me, and this providential news of you, which I have received through so charming a messenger, stirs me with the inward fear of many concealed emotions which awake and vibrate, arousing a pleasant sensation of anticipation.

"If my preliminary observations alarm you, if this indiscreet psychological and sentimental persecution displeases, I give you my word to remain forever silent concerning matters of this nature; and even so, this poor artist will always remain your devoted friend and one who admires and appreciates you highly.

"Receive me under that phase of intimate fraternity which once united us, notwithstanding my restlessness and your reserve; hear me with your

kindly smile of tolerance: I am going to reveal an unpublished page of this heart which you know of old, and which I scarcely understand myself.

" 'Now!' I imagine you are thinking, with reflexive compassion, 'He imagines he is in love!'

"You know many stories of my love affairs, and you will smile with incredulity at seeing me pursue another sweet delusion. I prophesy nothing, because I have been mistaken so many times; but I tell you on my honor that if this present love is not the final one it comes very near being so."

In imagining that the priest had smiled over the reading of this letter the writer had not guessed correctly. Even now he turned slightly pale and wrinkled his brows with a new sense of uncertainty upon recalling it. The poet's letter did not arouse the slightest anxiety on his own account; Don Miguel could reply to the personal allusions with which Rogelio Terán had begun his letter, with the utmost composure:

"See that you fulfill your spontaneous vow, and cease once for all your romantic researches; those 'white secrets' which you attribute to me, and which exist only in your imagination, are unworthy to inspire the most insignificant couplet."

The priest was compelled to overcome more formidable difficulties in order to answer the rest of the letter, where the artist told with lyric enthusiasm, as if it were the theme of a novel, of the meeting and the farewell, the inspiration of that "new page in the history of a heart." From the beauty sleep he had surprised on the journey, to

the painful farewell on the platform at Astorga, the whole sweet and pathetic story swept like a flash through the enamored lines; and Don Miguel, stirred to the depths by that strange and fervid tale, was far from smiling; the high and exalted praise revealed in one of the paragraphs reëchoed through his soul with compelling insistence:

"This exquisitely charming girl, who so well deserves both the names of María and Flor, has looked upon me with delight and tenderness in sweetest abandon of soul; and while I was allowing myself to dwell like a somnambulist on the brink of exquisite reality, she disappeared down the deserted road of the bleak plateau, accompanied by a dull, stupid old woman, on her way to face God only knows how much bitterness."

"God only knows how much!" repeated the priest, stirred by the latent aroma of sympathy spilling from the pen of the poet.

Expanded by the sacred perfume, the pure doctrine of a noble heart gave forth its fruit in these phrases:

"I know that this poor family look upon you as a confidant and friend in their most intimate concerns; that they place all their affairs and projects in your hands, and that there are plans afloat for a marriage between Mariflor and a cousin of hers which are not yet wholly matured. Will you discuss those affairs with me? Will you tell me if I would affect the girl's best interests by going to Valdecruces to rejoice in her presence under the shelter of your friendship? I am strongly tempted to make an effort to see her again. 'With what in-

tentions?' you ask. I do not know definitely myself; my first desire is to help her all I possibly can, and by no means to do her the slightest harm."

Upon reaching this part of the letter, which he repeated to himself every day from memory, the priest of Valdecruces came to a pause in his troubled reasoning, rested his elbows upon the crude railing of the balcony, and deliberately lighted a cigar.

He puffed at his cigar while the shadows deepened in the modest little parlor behind him, and the outlines of a desk and an easy chair, and the contours of a few high-backed benches, became barely discernible. Outside in the twilight, a little garden where the vegetables spread a pale tapestry of verdure over the ocher-colored ground, was becoming lost to view, and in the placid distance of the open fields the decline of the afternoon possessed a serene purity.

Don Miguel's eyes swept over the darkening garden, over the fragile group of houses marked out between highroads and silent streets, and then he fixed them upon the distant horizon, on the serene curves of the blue sky, where a magnificent Maytide sun seemed to be expiring in a stream of blood. The priest recalled that moment in which Mariflor had come at his call to answer clearly two transcendental questions: "Do you want your cousin for your husband?"

"No, father," replied the girl firmly without a trace of vacillation.

"And how about Rogelio Terán?"

Here sudden surprise dyed Florinda's cheeks, while with lowered eyes she nervously twisted the

corner of her kerchief, and exclaimed, as did Campoamor's heroine:

"How do you know?"

Although the priest in this tale was not "an aged man," nevertheless to him the girl possessed "a breast of crystal," as in the fable; and no sooner had she revealed her loving solicitude than words in defense of the rights and privileges of her heart leaped to her lips. By that time a pair of crystal-clear eyes that looked the priest direct in the face, and in which hope was shining like a moonbeam upon the sea, had revealed themselves to be as transparent as the breast.

The curate was deeply stirred on gazing at this young girl who looked straight before as did he himself, no doubt because she had many beautiful things to express with her dark and eager eyes. After a long exchange of thought they agreed upon a triple resolution: to write a truthful relation of the state of things to her father; to deal with her cousin concerning the matter only verbally, without in the meantime confirming the promise of marriage; and to reply to Terán in the manner which the curate should consider discreet, making no mention of the girl's regard for him.

In this manner Mariflor and Don Miguel proposed in friendly complicity to serve both the heart and the monetary interest, with a sentiment doubly charitable on the part of the priest; greedy and at the same time generous in the fervent spirit of the enamored girl.

"I will explain to Antonio myself this summer the reasons for my refusal, and I will beg the pro-

tection of his fortune for grandmother. If he is good, and if he is as rich as they say, can he refuse to save us all? Especially since I do not mean that he should give us anything; only that he lend us a little money without usury."

As Don Miguel received her eager proposal in silence, Florinda added with an air of keen anxiety:

"Do you think a miracle would be very unlikely to happen?"

"That would be—according to the circumstances."

"But I have promised Olalla to work one, with God's help, in order to free the estate for grandmother."

"And is it to be on the condition that Antonio concedes your wish, and that you refuse his?"

"Yes, that is it! Does it seem to you impossible of accomplishment?"

"Oh, transparent heart of woman!" thought the curate, smiling. "A most human mixture of egoism and charity, of obstinacy and tenderness! Well," he said sententiously, "faith moves mountains. There is nothing impossible to God."

The curate's last words caused a singular expression of confidence to overspread the girl's face; and so, filled with fervor, and trusting in the best, Mariflor had taken her leave.

From the balustrade upon which Don Miguel was leaning he saw her cross the garden and make her way out to the dimly lighted road at the precise instant that Rosicler was passing, swinging his shepherd's crook in tune to a couplet.

The two young people exchanged greetings be-

neath the wings of the breeze, while the landscape lay sleeping in the stillness of night and the deep blue sky blossomed with stars; and when both silhouettes were faintly outlined, separated now in the darkness, Rosicler's voice vibrated gayly, leaving in the air a suggestion of marriage, the snatch of a popular romance that sounded the warning:

> "Consider, maiden, what you're doing,
> Consider well what you're about to do,
> For the golden cord once twisted
> Can never more become untwined."

A bird made its last round through the garden, a ruddy star rolled between the clouds, and Don Miguel felt his eyes suddenly dimmed with tears, perhaps because of the melancholy of the moment, perhaps because of that "sad and white" recollection mentioned by the poet brought to mind by the words of the couplet, and by the youthful vision of a lass and a lad.

In this twilight, as splendid as that of another approaching night, the curate's deep meditation possessed the changes and shades of color of the onyx, and the swift flash of a smile would occasionally clear away the frown from his brow. As if suddenly having found a remedy for one of his perplexities, he tossed the stub of his cigar over the balcony, and turning toward the door leading to the hall, called promptly:

"Ascensión! Can you come?"

"I will be there at once," responded the sharp voice of a woman from the lower end of the house; and soon a young girl appeared, saying, as she entered the room:

"Shall I light the lamp?"

"Not yet. I want to ask if you succeeded in getting Marinela Salvadores to confess that secret you thought you had guessed."

"Yes, I did; exactly so!"

"Let us hear about it; you know that it is not mere curiosity that impels me to make investigations of this sort in which you help me out; I only want to do what I can for the girl; to relieve her suffering, that mysterious grief which nobody can understand. What, then, is the matter with her?"

"She feels that her vocation is to be a nun."

"Does she really feel a strong, true call?" exclaimed the astonished curate.

"Yes, a very strong call, uncle. If she can't become a nun of the order of St. Clare she will pine herself to death."

"But when did she get that idea?"

"One day when we were going to Astorga together and we had a message from you for the abbess; it was in the month of April."

The girl seated herself on the bench, and the curate, reclining in another beside her, listened with attention while the silent tremor of night enveloped the room.

"It was in the month of April," repeated Ascensión after a pause, giving much importance to her confidence. "A novitiate, a girl I had known in the normal school at Oviedo, came into the parlor with Mother Rosario. She told us that she was very happy in the cloister, that they had a lovely garden where they cultivate flowers for the Virgin, and that she really took divine delight in that life.

Marinela, who had not spoken a word, went out of the place touched by the vocation as by a miracle, and ever since then I realized that she is dying to become a nun."

"But, how about the endowment?" exclaimed Don Miguel impatiently.

"That is just what is troubling her; she confessed her sorrows to me to-day on returning from Piedralbina; she does not even so much as dream of ever being able to get the money to enter the convent of St. Clare, and she cries all the time!"

"And why must she have set her heart on entering no other order than that of St. Clare? If she has a true religious calling she could just as well enter some other convent where it is not necessary to pay a thousand dollars down."

"That's just what I've told her; but she insists on that one, and she won't have any other. The nuns wear such lovely habits, all white! And they devote themselves to taking care of the altar cloths, to making sweets, and doing embroidery; dainty and holy tasks!"

"Yes," replied the curate, taking note of the boastful tone in the girl's voice, "and to keeping long fasts and vigils, to doing penance and making sacrifices."

After a brief silence Ascensión added with a tinge of irony:

"In her home Marinela fasts, and her whole life is a sacrifice. To be a nun of the order of St. Clare is an enviable fate."

"For you also?"

"Oh, not for me, since I have a dowry and can marry well; it's quite a different matter!"

"Because Máximo has money, isn't that the idea?"

"To be sure! But Olalla and Marinela will not be able to marry. Everybody says that tía Dolores has lost all her property."

"So that the idea of this girl becoming a nun seems to you an enviable fate merely because she hasn't a cent to her name?"

"You see—living in the shadow of a beautiful cloister, dressed like a lily, taking care of a garden for the Virgin, winning heaven by means of prayers and sighs, is a much better fate than to toil in the fields like a mule just to be able to eat a bit of scanty black bread, and to grow old in the very flower of one's youth; if I were Marinela I should want to be a nun too."

"But, child, how about the endowment? Don't you see that if Marinela were to be given twenty thousand reales so that she might enter Santa Clara, the money would serve just as well for getting married? You have less, and only with what you have you're going to make a good marriage, as you said; poverty doesn't justify the religious calling in this case, and it is better so, even though it were possible to realize your friend's desires."

Ascensión, the primary teacher, the niece of the señor cura, did not flush upon finding herself involved in such commentaries, but, being clever and astute, she had recourse to her uncle's wisdom and logic.

"Remember that many prelates receive legacies

for endowing poor novitiates, but never for endowing brides. There are rich devotees who protect the religious vocations with immense charity; there are special places in the convents, and, in case of need, it would seem to me less difficult for a woman having nothing but the ground beneath her feet and the heaven above to enter a cloister with the habit than to enter the church with the bridegroom. Isn't that true?"

The question, so exact and pessimistic, cleaved the darkness like a missile, and the curate straightened himself as he received it, and placed his hand against his breast as if he felt himself wounded.

He sighed without replying, took a few steps about the room in the darkness, and suddenly turned toward the balcony where the moon had just begun to shine through a pallid veil of mist.

"Shall I light the lamp?" the girl asked again, considering the interview closed.

With grave meaning, which she did not fully comprehend, the curate of Valdecruces advanced through the darkness toward the divine radiance, and pointing toward heaven replied:

"Let this give me light."

CHAPTER IX

HAIL, MARAGATA!

THAT roving and audacious rider who was crossing the steppe on a mule, in the flood of sunshine, with the air of an adventurer, at a distance resembled Don Quixote; slender, lithe, impatient, he was examining the horizon and the roads, dreaming chimeras, just as did the illustrious knight of the sorrowful figure. A poverty-stricken Sancho, neither fat nor content, hired in Astorga along with the mule, was accompanying him on foot; in this case, master and servant were not gossiping along the way, as happens in novels where the curious hidalgo rides through an unfamiliar country accompanied by a guide, and everything prompts the intruder to question the native about this, that, or the other thing.

This particular guide was not especially explicit; short of words and long of legs, possibly he was endeavoring to economize in speech what he was expending in steps, and thus he was sparing his mouth while his feet were perspiring.

Neither did the knight's questions seem to be the most appropriate for breaking down the peon's passive reserve; he inquired in the most confusing manner concerning agriculture, history, customs, and the special rights and privileges of the region, and the

poor Maragato shrugged his shoulders beneath his gray jacket with rude perplexity.

"Here, as for agriculture," at last he managed to reply, "well, rye. As for customs—to be born, to emigrate, to die, just as everywhere else! As for history, the old wives' tales, yarns about Goths and Romans—you'll find out for yourself! And as for the other things you speak of, the deuce! I never heard tell of anything of the sort!"

The peon was a crude fellow, condemned by innate rudeness to servitude which he was enduring at the time in connection with an inn at Astorga.

The knight-errant, seen at close range, had traded Mambrino's traditional enchanted helmet for a straw hat, and the famous lance for an oaken switch; he carried a small saddlebag on the crupper; delicate gloves grasped the bridle reins, and he wore gold eyeglasses; he was young, and seemed to be happy.

As the morning advanced the broad tract of untilled soil lying bathed in the flood of sunshine seemed more vast, more sterile, and more solitary. The light fell with arrogance, in all the plenitude of the month of June; and the vault of heaven hung above the plain in protecting majesty, luminous and brilliant. The hoofs of the saddle animal awoke a stifled echo as they clanked against the dusty ground, and the heather growing along the ridges beside the road was withering with thirst and despair.

Wearied of his endeavor to carry on the lagging conversation with the guide, the traveler began to people the mute solitude with visions and historic memories. He gave rein to fantasy, and began by wondering whether it were to these dim, arid, and

desolate paths that the tale of a fierce struggle referred—of a battle in which the Goth, Theodoric, destroyed the troops of the Suevian, Rechiario, on the plains of the paramo one famous day, the third before the nones of October. Scarcely had he recalled this barbaric bit of history than a new flash of the imagination brought before his vision the knightly recollection of a certain famous tilt at arms, which took place in the fifteenth century on the border of the "French Road" in the broad land of the "forgotten towns."

And now those who were sweeping across the plain roundabout the dreaming rider were not men of arms: they were the most gallant jousters of the Middle Ages in martial order of tournament, on their way to the brilliant joust of Paso Honroso, maintained by Suero de Quiñones and nine other companions in arms. No less than seventy-eight knights from distant kingdoms and cities surprised the profound silence of the steppe with the brave trotting of their chargers, eager for a place in the celebrated contest where the defenders proposed to challenge three hundred lancers, breaking their shafts with Milanese swords.

A heated outburst of ferocity caused the oaken rod to be switched against the haunches of the mule; the animal responded with a vigorous kick, and the traveler thought himself transported to the famous tilting field upon the glossy back of an Andalusian filly. The strains of piercing trumpet calls in loud blasts, opening the tilt, fired him with singular mettle, and, as if forming a frame for the remarkable festival, he caught glimpses of the exquisite

beauty of Doña Inés, Doña Beatrice, and Doña Sol; they were about to redeem the gloves which they had pledged upon the gallantry of the combatants.

Suddenly the humble silhouette of a living image, candid and lowly, rose in the dust of the highway; the dreamer raised his hand to his hat with deferential courtesy, and a poor Maragatan woman mounted on a patient donkey, passed with downcast eyes, murmuring faintly:

"Good morning."

At the timid sound of the greeting the charm became broken in the imagination of the knight who at that very instant had fancied himself uncovering before Doña Mencía, the famous wife of Don Gonzalo Ruiz de la Vega, an illustrious lady whose glove was to be redeemed in the honorable jousts by the Count of Benavente.

Don Quixote sighed, smiling; he glanced about, and was astonished, as if overcome by the infinite austerity of the landscape; not a cloud raced through the sky, not an atom of life palpitated upon the plain. Here and there the sterile soil was cracked, wrinkled, and yellow, like the corpse of an aged mother down whose face tears had left furrows deep and cold.

At the sudden impulse of that tragic impression, again the horseman's fantasy surged high like a crested wave, and once more the gray plain became peopled by a troop of characters surging from legends and parchments, codices and archives; they trooped past in picturesque confusion; some as slowly as if lulled to sleep by the remote sound of ancient songs. The deafening pæans of a primitive

religion mingled with the rude psalms of the Roman people and the Christian prayers of those devout souls who, while the Mother of the Savior was still dwelling on earth, sent her a verbal message to Palestine from Astorga. The pale and doleful figure of the "monkish king" passed with a vacant stare in its eyes, the habit in tatters, dragging his affliction beside the brutal dexterity of the King Mauregato, the legislator of the fabled tribute of the hundred maidens. Then, in the barren distance, appeared the fantastic army which, on the eve of the battle of las Navas went to knock on the doors of the monastery of San Isidoro, in the city of León. The novel host was captained by the Count Fernán Gonzáles and the Cid, seeking King Ferdinand I in his tomb, he who should assist them in the battle. Succeeding these legendary visions, Amacos, Asturians, Celts, Iberians, and Romans, Jews and Moors surged forth in an imaginary circle, building and destroying with feverish eagerness. Augustus, Vespasian, Theodoric, Witiza, Tarik, Almanzor, a close-packed crowd of conquerors and conquered, fixed their ambition and their ideals upon this battered ground, thrusting lances and seeds beneath the soil, watering it with tears and with sweat. But the desert heath, silent, immutable as eternity, heeded neither the wounding by the weapons nor the bitterness of the weeping; it did not fertilize a grain of seed nor did the sweat of the dauntless generations soften its harshness. Illustrious bishops and fervent legionaries crawled over it on their knees, without tempering its asperity or winning a smile from it. This harsh field of penitence, productive of nothing

but sacrifice and privations, was sanctified by legions of believers in quest of hermits and apostles; Jenadio, Fructuoso, Valerian, Froilán, Dominic (he who wrote after his name "of the Highway," because he had helped to build the French Road with his own hands) were saints who set up the cross and sent forth prayers in the glorious spiritual campaign in the desert of León and Castile. And with so much love, so much heroism and prowess, was there not sufficient human warmth to impart life to the ancestral wastes, to resurrect the dead plain? For how many centuries had this poor soil been lying outstretched, insensible as a corpse, cracked like an aged face where furrows had been wrought by tears? What bygone ages, what unknown creatures, had felt it beating rich and fruitful like the prolific soil of the heart of a nation?

These were too many questions! Although the traveler had refreshed his memory by reading many volumes before starting on his journey, his mental soliloquy was still lacking in documents and data for discussing the causes of that perpetual desolation. He wished to separate his wearied mind from the complicated skein of these arguments, but the noble conscience of the hidalgo and the patriot accused him of neglect and ingratitude as he rode along the deserted highway. Who better than a poet might open a broad stream to the modern currents of culture and sympathy, forcing the sterile entrails of the bleak heath to yield golden harvests? The rider threw back his youthful head with arrogant impulse, and rested the caress of his blue eyes upon the dry stalks along the roadside; he wished

to become enamored of this vague suggestion that had suddenly assaulted him, to feel his enthusiasm strong and powerful for the liberation of this land, the native soil of an illustrious race, the witness and field of an immortal history, the eternal mother condemned to slavery and to poverty in the very heart of a flourishing nation.

The hidalgo's prudent egoism told him that his dream would be the undertaking of a madman. But the eagerness of the artist and the ambitions of the Quixote responded promptly. And has not every modern writer an invincible reliance on his pen? Have not the book and the newspaper become the conquering propagandists of ideals?

The mule had suddenly stopped. He gave a loud whinny; he sniffed the air, and a light foam appeared upon his muzzle.

"What is the matter with him?" the gentleman asked while the unmounted servant was trying to urge him forward.

"He is upset by the dryness," responded the man tersely.

At the mere mention that the animal was thirsty the poet's thoughts took another turn. He felt the desolation of the region with a sensation of keen displeasure; a violent desire for cool water, for running and refreshing water, dried his lips and heated his brow. He searched the monotony of the horizon with the wild anguish of the shipwrecked mariner seeking a liberating sail on the deserted expanse of the sea. But not even the wings of an insect stirred in the vibrating light; the very air seemed to be lying asleep above the plain, and the

flame emitted by the sun shed its fire over the waste like a lamp burning above an enormous sepulchre.

In vain the rider, thirsting for sympathy, sought some friendly countenance upon which to rest his eyes; by way of sole response to his eager demand the implacable soil offered a gray vegetation of dried thistles and creeping cat briers.

Then the poet's mind was assaulted by swarms of fleeting visions: courts and armies, potentates and magnates, artists and farmers, fleeing toward the valleys, toward the rivers and the coasts; they were seeking the amenities of the forests and the richness of the harvests. The Castilian kings, Ordoños and Bermudos, Urracas and Berenguelas, Fernandos and Alfonsos, at the height of their power felt their crowns shake at the threats from the desert waste, as if they had been the tragic winds of death and extermination. At last that noble lord of ten thousand vassals and eighty-three towns, Alvar Pérez Osorio, Marquis of Astorga, chief ensign of the king, valorous standard bearer of the Blessed Banner in the battle of Clavijo, abdicated his omnipotent power over the steppe, accepting abandonment and expatriation—he who, to the twenty-three titles of his armorial bearings, could add the unique distinction of being able to call himself "Lord of the Paramo." The ancient house of Osorio was descended from Oriental emperors, and produced the counts of Altamira, of Luna, of Guzmán, of León, of Trastamara, and of Cabrera. It was thus the root and source of the purest Spanish lines, and arbiter of the liberties of Castile. Its descendants renounced their lordly dominion on the steppe, and,

forgetting the asperity of this cradle, took refuge in a more hospitable land.

Far away in the distance, where the sky and earth seemed to mingle in an infinite harmony of space, appeared a white spot. Distinctly seeing it fluttering, as if darting swiftly through the air with arrogant majesty, the modern Quixote, in the enthusiasm of his dreams, murmured:

"Can it be the canvas of a ship? Can it be the banner of the battle of Clavijo?"

History, fantasy and legend, whirled madly beneath the blond forehead of the youthful dreamer; fast bound in the frightful nightmare of the plain, confused between realities and chimeras, he vaguely was conscious of the shadow of sleepiness, the weariness of the journey, and the bitter desolation of the place. He wished to overcome his drowsiness, to shake off the delirium and fatigue; finally he made an effort to recover himself, and upon succeeding he realized that he was hungry, and that he had a slight headache; it was almost eleven o'clock. He had left Astorga after a very light breakfast, and the ride and the sun had stimulated his appetite for lunch.

"What is that I see over there?" he asked the guide, pointing toward the only spot on the horizon.

"It's the mother stork," replied the Maragato; and he added, "Valdecruces is not far off now."

"It is neither the sail of a ship nor an heroic standard," thought the poet, jesting at his visionary perturbation. "It is a pair of powerful wings which in accordance with their destiny should be free, but which are held captive through their fidelity."

The traveler remained submerged in pleasant lassitude, in the soothing bath of poesy stimulated by the vision of the bird.

In the strange life of the enormous bird everything was at the same time gentle and strong; the stability of its nest, sometimes centuries old, stowed away in the church tower beneath the cross in the tender heart of the Castilian villages, the gentle treatment of its fledglings, the serious and noble grace with which it watches over the planted fields and lives in companionship with the farmers, the strange and unchanging condition of its marriage for its entire life; its return to the same place every year; and the restful poise of its figure, its step, and its flight, which blends so harmoniously with the quiet tones of the landscape. All the uplifting characteristics of the bird friend of man seemed to the curious traveler touching and symbolic.

"A Maragatan woman and a mother stork have done me the honors of the paramo," he thought, overcome by sudden emotion.

At that moment the little caravan, winding past a low hill, caught up with the bird standing calmly in the road. Its long neck was swaying back and forth, its bill slightly inclined toward the ground; it was glancing pensively at the sterile clods, like the woman who had murmured a humble "Good morning." It stood waiting, motionless in its customary posture of meditation and repose, until the traveler approached; then it slowly raised its little eyes of indefinable color, gray and ashen like the desert waste itself; took a few steps with dignity and composure, lifted its body, with measured move-

ment, and finally opened its splendid wings in easy and graceful flight, disappearing along the horizon in majestic spirals.

There was no time for the poet to ponder upon so strange a spectacle, for upon attaining the almost imperceptible height, the dry road revealed new signs of coming to an end.

At this point the land rose gently, and then descended in mild undulations, subjugated and humble, showing signs of recent cultivation and friendly traces of footpaths.

To the curious questions of the rider the peon replied that here began the harvest land of Valdecruces, and that those barren patches had already been worked over three times and were ready to receive the seed "during the week of the Remedios" at the beginning of autumn.

Pressed by new questions, the Maragato explained that the poverty of the soil did not permit annual planting in the same land, and so some were left fallow while others were producing.

"These," he added, "have been resting seven months."

He pointed out the clods recently turned up beside the deep ruts of the broad highway, which began to dwindle away with the feigned deliberation of a prisoner who, on trying to escape, endeavors to conceal his haste and his hope. For more reasons than one might the forlorn fugitive over the fallow ground heave a sigh, as he sought the vision of a harvest, the grateful benefaction of a flowing stream, or the comforting shelter of a village.

The deep restlessness that seemed to fluctuate

along the irksome route communicated itself to the travelers; but the mule suddenly hastened his steps, and began sniffing the air and whinnying. They had changed their course across the steppe at the indication of the gentleman, who wished to examine everything, and they entered Valdecruces through a transitory beauty spot of ripened rye.

A few steps farther on the rider could make out the green mass of leaves and stalks, an unexpected oasis, close by the desert waste that seemed to surge, insecure and trembling, with the venturesomeness of furtive love, against cold ingratitude.

A warm breath of spring swept over the harsh dorsum of the plain, and the bursting stalks exhaled a delicate perfume.

The slender leaves around the ripening grains were beginning to turn pale, the delicate flowers in the swollen rachises already were dry; but in the atmosphere still floated a kind of misty haze produced by the vapors and by the glumes of the flower.

Entering so suddenly into this unexpected paradise, the stranger imagined that, in the swaying of the green and golden stalks, he could hear an earnest and harmonious supplication of enchanting tones.

The guide then began to lead the animal off the main road, along a narrow trail through the tall rye which swayed with the restlessness of a swell of the sea. Perfume vibrated roundabout the rider like a breath, and he could see the bold peaks of Teleno and Fuencebadón looming into the horizon more clearly now than before.

The poet understood that the marvel of this harvest, wrested from the paramo like booty after

a stubborn battle, was due to the work and endurance of the Maragatan woman; that beneath this evanescent sea of waving stalks the youth and beauty of a handful of forsaken beings held as weaklings in the world had undergone shipwreck; that not even the heroic satisfaction of a noble sacrifice was granted the unhappy captives of the soil in the wreck of their spirit and their mental development. And the only human force powerful enough to compel the indomitable soil of the desert waste to live and to fructify, was the boundless treasure of the inherent tenderness of woman!

Upon the noble paramo of León, the native soil of the purest of the race, the theater and relic of immortal memories, drowse the Maragatan people, unknown and obscure, the offshoot of a remote race of mysterious origin. For entire centuries have they survived the desolation of the desert waste, alone in the integrity of their rare purity, stranded upon the plain like a helpless ship grounded and sinking, which is abandoned and forgotten in the turbulent sea of civilization. But, at last, in the tragedy of this phantom ship, the stronger saved themselves. The laws of the sea of land, more harsh than those that rule on the seas of water, permitted that the women and children should forever remain captive on the barbaric waves of the desert waste, while the useful men demanded to be taken in tow by the life of progress that they might exploit its shores. And the poor Maragatan women found themselves alone, condemned never to become extinguished, because their husbands frequently approached this silent fleet of brave women of the Maragato land becalmed

upon the plain; potent and virile, they come to impose the propagation of the species as a tribute, to leave the seed of the race in the fecund organs of women so capable that even in the cruel paramo they have produced flowers.

These ideas sorrowfully flooded the mind of the wandering poet; lulled by the fragrance of the rye, he rode on through the green stalks that stirred gently as with the heave of an earthquake.

Again the youth felt his unquiet will rise with the generous stimulus of redemption. If it had been madness to dream of the liberation of the entire desert waste, it was not so much out of the way to long for that of the wretched women; and if even this project were too great to be attempted by a single heart, a pen and a strophe remained to the artist as well as the certainty of ability to use those noble weapons with glory and for the sake of rescuing a single woman from the sea of land and make her free and happy.

At each step taken by the mule this dream assumed firmer substance in the gallant sentiments of youth.

Since he had been drawn toward Valdecruces, he assured himself, by curiosity and whimsical fancy, he would, with art and loving-kindness, guide the stream of tenderness toward the place where the definite love of his life should flow to form a restful pool.

Sudden outbursts of fervor stirred him, enthusiastic and ambitious, his hands tremulous with fever, his mind filled with secrets, the future crowded with hopes. All the emotions he had ex-

perienced during his journey became condensed, vibrating in that last one; of all the chimeras and memories that had accompanied him until now, there remained in his imagination, as a cipher and symbol, the beautiful figure of a woman; it was clad in a regional costume, perhaps a development from the prevailing style of the time when the land was under Gothic rule, or of the elegant Moorish weaves; her face was as exquisite as a poet's dream, and her soul as heroic as those of the race of León.

This solitary figure reigned as absolute mistress of his impatient thoughts, when, after having made his way through the rye, the clayey hump of the group of houses appeared in the landscape, and a small plot of untilled ground lay before him but soon merged with the streets of the town.

One of these opened into a broad space resembling a square ornamented in the center with a fountain. Beside the basin stood a woman waiting for her jar to fill. She was dressed, according to the custom of the country, with much display, no doubt because it was Sunday; she did not notice the travelers, but seemed to be absorbed in contemplation of the running water.

Just as the solemn pealing of a bell close at hand announced midday throughout the parish the travelers drew rein at the fountain.

The attendant uncovered in order to recite the appropriate prayers, and the gentleman imitated him, with his thoughts far away; but suddenly, upon seeing the image of his recent dreams beside the clear and sparkling water, he approached her, transported with joy.

The surprised water-carrier lifted her gaze, and as her eyes filled with light they shone like topazes; she proved to be a pale, languid girl with a slender figure. Her attention having been called by the ringing of the bell, she was about to bless herself, when the stranger made his appearance; then, staring at him, intoxicated with admiration, she mechanically traced the sign of the cross.

The singing water was laughing within the mouth of the overflowing jar, rippling down the sides with a gentle murmur, while Rogelio Terán y de la Hoz, a gentleman from the province of Santander, a romantic novelist, a lyric poet, a sentimentalist, young and handsome, with his hat in his right hand, declared reverently:

"Hail, O Maragata, august mistress of the paramo, hail!"

Scandalized by the recital of this unusual prayer, which she had never heard before, the girl took the traveler either for a heretic or a madman; she enveloped him for an instant in the gaze of her deep green eyes, and then, deserting her water jar, turned and fled with her cheeks dyed a flaming crimson.

The patter of her tiny feet was still resounding down the adjacent street, when the crestfallen gallant suddenly felt the sharp prick of hunger, and even more keenly the pain in his head; but upon crossing the square there appeared before his view the desired shelter of the house of the curate located for vigilant devotion close beside the church.

The place was as silent and mysterious as if uninhabited. The bell had ceased to reverberate, and the mother stork in the tower loomed into view, pro-

tecting the nest beneath the cross with extended wings.

The Maragato gave two loud knocks on the familiar door of Don Miguel, and from under the red-tiled roof of the church a flock of black martins flew out in alarm.

CHAPTER X

THE STRANGER

WHEN Marinela gained the door of her house, gasping for breath and overcome with terror, her mother, from the lower end of the kitchen, where they were waiting dinner for her, predicted:

"This young mischief has broken her jar for sure!"

The members of the household waited in mute expectation for the girl to explain her return in such a state of terror.

"I haven't broken the jar," she murmured timidly; "but I saw a gentleman saying his prayers to me, to me myself, a crazy sort of a prayer beginning with 'Hail,' exactly as if I were the Virgin. He had just come to town, and he looked as if he had come from a distance; either he is possessed of the devil, or he is a Jew."

"Where was that?" asked Olalla in amazement, while the youngsters dashed for the door, and Mariflor also made a movement of curiosity.

"Beside the fountain," said the water carrier, taking the road again behind her cousin and her sister.

Tía Dolores, absorbed in lighting a few twigs of oak by the embers of the coals kept in a hollow spot

on the hearth, seemed to give no heed to the news, and Ramona, slowly cutting portions from a great loaf of black bread, grumbled under her breath:

"What nonsense!"

Neither in the silent street, scorched by the flaming sun, nor in the deserted plaza, could the investigators discover the slightest trace of the mysterious stranger. The brimming jar continued spilling out the laughing water, and as it gurgled down the sides it seemed to conceal mocking tones beneath its gentle ripple.

"You were dreaming, girl," her curious companions announced to poor Marinela.

"I was not dreaming," declared the girl in tones of conviction, her deep eyes still palpitating with wonder.

"Was he young?" suggested Florinda with a careless air.

"Young and handsome; he was riding a mule as tall as ours; he had an attendant and a saddlebag."

"Was he coming from Astorga?"

The Maragatan girl shrugged her shoulders somewhat uncertainly.

"I think," she said, "that he came through the rye field, I don't know from where."

Her pupils, changing like precious stones, assumed fleeting shades of turquoise.

Olalla walked on ahead with the boys, carrying the jar, and Mariflor, encircling her cousin's waist with her arm, still asked eagerly:

"Did he have light hair, and did he wear glasses?"

"I don't remember about that," stammered the

maiden, anxiously searching her memory for the outlines of the face of the person who had so suddenly appeared. Then she added:

"He had blue eyes."

"Really?"

"Really and truly."

The two girls became silent, while the beating of their hearts was so accelerated that it seemed as if the blue eyes had proven to be an abyss for both of them.

During dinner not a word was spoken concerning Marinela's adventure; only Pedro glanced at the girl twice, making an expressive sign on his forehead as if saying, "something wrong here." The girl flushed with impatience, and Olalla laid a finger on her lips with a gesture of prudence, recommending peace.

They ate their noonday meal seated around one of the rickety tables with grave composure and imposing deliberation as if fulfilling a sacred obligation. Olalla, who officiated as "priestess" over this solemn ceremony, served first Florinda and next Marinela; then she placed the portions for Pedro and Tomás on a single plate; on another that of Carmina and herself, and she left the rest of the watery stew for her grandmother and her mother. Thus two tacit preferences had become established, which seemed just in consideration of the lack of appetite and the effort made by two of the diners, each of them mistress of a plate, their troubled faces surrounded by the steam rising from the unappetizing stew.

The repugnance with which the two girls partook of their food was so evident that Ramona, after a

few words of protest half stifled by mouthfuls and sips, finally said in that hoarse voice of hers, destitute of modulations and shades of tenderness:

"Why don't you soak chunks of bread in the broth? One must eat in order to work! What a pair of girls! You're not worth a spit!"

The old grandmother sighed her customary and trembling "Aye!" and Olalla rested her blue eyes questioningly upon the delinquents; they always ate very little, but as for to-day! With a solicitous glance she took in the table, but saw no other food than the hard black bread; then she turned toward the hearth, destitute of cooking vessels, smoking beneath the kettle wherein was boiling the water for the feed for the pig. She swept an equally searching glance over the walls and ceiling of the kitchen, and after turning toward her mother by way of timid consultation, which received no reply, she asked the two girls who were lacking in appetite:

"Would you like to have a little slice of codfish?"

All eyes turned upon the poor codfish held prisoner on high by an iron hook, hanging like an interrogation point above the miserable room.

The two girls favored by the generous offer had hastened to thrust morsels of bread into the broth after being censured by Ramona for their fastidiousness. They shook their heads in the negative before the prospect of the gift, dull of speech, as if a kindred sorrow closed the mouths of both, and they glanced at each other with singular emotion, almost ready to break down.

"No; but you," growled the mother angrily, turning toward her daughter, "you have very fine tastes!

You were born to be a canoness, but you came into the world too late!"

The girl burst into a fit of weeping, revealing exaggerated signs of suffering, as if other secret misfortunes rushed to her eyes burning with tears, while her cousin, feeling herself also included in the insistent accusation, resorted, to the utmost of her will power, to keep from losing control of herself.

Olalla had turned pale; nothing stirred her so deeply as the tears of her brothers and sisters.

"Mother, for mercy's sake!" she pleaded conciliatingly. And she added, feigning happiness: "There's dessert to-day, as it's Sunday."

The boys glanced at each other with broad smiles, and as she rose and walked toward a secret cupboard she caressed Marinela on the shoulder and whispered into her ear words as soft as the cooing of a dove.

The apples and cheese made the boys so happy that their animation was reflected over the entire family, and Olalla, more free of care, suddenly gave expression to a thought that had been causing her extreme indignation ever since the evening before:

"The idea of Rosenda's man coming home without a single miserable cent!"

Ramona welcomed the conversation with lively interest, murmuring:

"She does exactly right in keeping to herself."

"Exactly!"

" 'Keeping to herself,' what does that mean?" asked Mariflor curiously.

Her aunt, her accent more bitter than ever, then explained:

"Why, not to live with him; not to receive him; to refuse even to speak to him."

The old woman winked her eye suddenly, as if blinking with sleep, or as if she were demanding a teardrop in order to clear her eyes of clouds.

"God help me!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, God help all poor mothers who have been abandoned with their children to support," exclaimed the daughter-in-law.

A tiny flash, as if it had come wearily from very far away, sparkled in the pupils of the old woman; and she replied querulously:

"You need not say that about yourself."

"Why not?"

"If your husband cannot send you money, at least you can spend your own—and some that belongs to others!"

"My parents' money has been spent on the grandchildren, too, for I didn't come naked to the marriage—and I've done my full share of sweating out there in the fields!"

"Such is life!"

"But when what one has is very little, and one spends one's life working like a slave, the father ought at least to support the children—or not make them!"

"Woman!"

"Just as you hear!"

"And when the husband has bad luck and poor health?" remonstrated the old woman, yellow and trembling like the flame of a candle.

"Let him tease till he gets tired," spat out Ramona brutally, rising to her feet.

Her great stature dominated the room almost on a level with the ceiling. She extended her arms toward the remains of the dinner, and with a single sweep picked up the plates and spoons, the crumbs of bread, the soup bowl and the tablecloth; she deposited them all silently in the corner where it was her habit to do the dishwashing. She put a sackcloth apron over her coarse skirt and silently began the humble task from which she excused her daughter on holidays.

Over the far-away glow flickering in the eyes of the old woman, fell the wrinkled curtain of her eyelids. Tía Dolores rested an elbow on her knees, her forehead in her hand, her feet on a low stool, and she seemed to grow heavy with the sleep of a carefree siesta.

The youngsters had scurried off toward the barnyard, and the three girls, with colorless cheeks, motionless, remained bent all in the same posture of amazement, as if stupefied by those phrases that rang with the sound of dispute and malediction.

Olalla, overcome by shame that her cousin should surprise such bitter intimacies, endeavored to conceal her displeasure by continuing to speak of Rosenda Alonso.

"She is a daughter of tío Rosendín, you understand?" she said in a low voice to Mariflor.

"The sacristan?"

"Yes. Just imagine it, the poor thing had twins last week; do you remember?"

"Yes; I met her a few days before that, and it certainly aroused one's pity to see her."

The girl shuddered at the recollection of that poor

creature, as weak as a shadow, who did not even have the form of a woman, her face begrimed, with heavy step carrying a bundle of fagots and an enormous abdomen.

"She has another young one that doesn't walk yet, either," continued Olalla, "and she hasn't a crumb to put in her mouth; when, the first thing you know, her starving husband goes and puts in his appearance too!"

"And he, is he good?"

"He may be; but he is as poor as the very rats!"

"But if they love each other——"

"How are they going to love each other, stupid, without having even so much as an equity in a piece of land?"

Triumphant at expounding that evident impossibility, the girl added:

"For even less than that the Maragatan women keep to themselves when their husbands come home without any money. Isn't that so, Marinela?" And she gently shook her dreamy sister.

Marinela seemed suddenly to arouse from solemn meditation, and she had to have the question repeated, and then responded with respectful fatalism:

"It is the custom of the country."

Florinda, overwhelmed by the indisputable fact of such a custom, lowered her head without making a reply. Other and more intimate thoughts filled her mind, which had been greatly agitated ever since Marinela met the stranger with the blue eyes.

Pedro came in stretching himself, and saying that after the rosary he was going out to play ninepins; and his bored air made it evident that he was long-

ing for the time to come. As he had spoken in a penetrating tone, Olalla warned him by signs that his grandmother was sleeping, and he turned and went back to the barnyard where the youngsters were quarreling over the possession of an apple core.

From the darkness, where she was busy at her task, came the dry voice of Ramona:

"Aren't you going to drive the ducks out to the pond?"

The grandmother stirred without opening her eyes and the girls rose to their feet as if moved by a spring.

"Yes, at once," said the elder. And the others followed her with great celerity as if afraid to remain in the kitchen.

The harsh light out of doors caused the three girls to blink their eyes. The little parlor was full of flies and dust, and the yard lay silent and burning, in the full glare of the noontide sun.

"Where are those impish youngsters?" said Olalla, seeing that her brothers had disappeared.

Merry sounds of laughter from the direction of the garden floated out upon the air, and a flock of expectant hens fluttered about the feet of the girls.

In the dark room which they had just left, it seemed as if the little light it had contained—the golden glow that entered through the little parlor with a heated vapor seeming to rise from the ground —had gone out with them. The still glowing log shed within the deep hearth the ruddy shades of an expiring fire, and an odor of dirty water rose into the air, mingling with the darkness and the smoke.

Tía Dolores, no sooner had the girls gone out, straightened herself with remarkable vigor, closed the two doors that gave access to the kitchen, and taking a few steps in the dim light, turning toward the corner where her daughter-in-law was stirring about, asked:

"If Isidoro comes you do not mean to receive him?"

There was a cold silence. Then followed a "No, señora."

Less firmly the voice of the old woman spoke again:

"And if some day your son, Pedro, should come home to you sick and poor, would you receive him?"

Promptly vibrated a vigorous "Yes, señora."

Then tía Dolores, extending her arms with a sharp creaking of her old bones, replied vigorously:

"Then don't forget that this house is mine!"

The old woman stood there, silent and suffering, while from the dusky corner came no response to her irrefutable assertion, for Ramona, who had finished her dishwashing, had silently opened the door leading to the stable, and had gone out, carrying the feed for the pig.

The stream, a branch of the River Duerna, which during the winter months passes laboriously through the mill, makes its entrance into Valdecruces in the humble guise of a brook, reduced by the dryness of the summer, which on occasions is so intense as wholly to obliterate the ever shrinking rivulet. This boon comes from that side where the crops ripen earliest, where not all the soil is fallow, and where some of the parcels might even pompously

be called "irrigated land" when the burning heat melts the frozen snows on Teleno, and a few providential streamlets offer to this corner of the plain the charitable murmur of their alms.

From that same side, too, on this memorable day, a poet had entered with the ambition of playing the part of a liberator, just as if all the smiles of hope were destined to come to Valdecruces from that direction.

While Olalla was waiting for the ducks to have their bath in the shrunken pool the two other girls stood silent and thoughtful, gazing at the slender thread of the stream; and, with no other preamble, as if under the spell of an invincible suggestion, Marinela said:

"Yes, yes; he came from that direction!"

Her voice, full of mystery, vibrated in the ear of Florinda, who thrilled with uneasiness.

"The heat is a perfect volcano!" declared Olalla vaguely, and Florinda covered her hair with her white pocket-handkerchief.

In the enervating heat of midday the air was stifling, and the baked and thirsty earth seemed to be lying asleep, while not a whisper issued from the houses through the windows which were opened like mouths in an indolent yawn.

The heat had come very early and the farmers with good reason feared that their crops would be dried up before they had matured for reaping; they were supplying them with moisture while it was still possible to obtain it through irrigation, demanding even the last drop of the brook which had begun to run as dry as in August, and which was derived

from snow melted in the mountains by this same wind that was consuming the waters of the Duerna on the plain.

These thoughts filled the mind of Olalla with fatiguing persistence: this brook, close to her street, would not provide her with water for washing the clothes, or for bathing the ducks, or for supplying the kitchen; and, moreover, they would not be able to hire any one to assist them in the work of irrigation, nor in the hoeing and weeding; perhaps not in the reaping and harvesting either. The working women were too poor to wait for their pay; not a cent was coming from America; tío Cristóbal was demanding either the interest or the house, and her grandmother was sinking into a state of dotage, forgetting what sums she was owing, and what property was her own, how much must be paid out, and how much must be obtained. There were no animals left to be butchered, and the stew had to be made without fat and without strips of flesh, like that of the most poverty-stricken person in the town. Olive oil was becoming scarce; the boys had no shoes; her mother was sick and quarrelsome; her disposition more untractable than ever.

"Holy heaven!" exclaimed the girl in the midst of her meditations, unable to restrain herself.

"What is the matter?" her cousin asked.

But Olalla knew by instinct the art of feigning. With her cautious and reserved disposition she was not given to expansiveness; she felt a keen sense of shame at this frightful poverty which with gigantic strides was taking possession of her home, and even in the bosom of her family she endeavored to con-

ceal it, less through compassion than through the pride of a vigorous woman, through a strange cupidity that impelled her with a fierce desire to keep, as far as possible, sorrows and troubles for herself alone, as a miser conceals a treasure.

"The matter is," she calmly replied, "that you girls are getting overheated without the slightest need; go back to the house!"

"No, no!" the others hastened to say with obstinacy.

As Olalla felt that the negative was enveloped in clouds of uncertainty, she wished to clear away the silent misunderstanding and then stammered high-sounding words that trembled on the verge of obscurity, like timid fledglings thrust forth to fly at midnight:

"We are to dance this afternoon. Marinela must begin to be a young lady now, and you probably have learned the dances practiced around here in the two months that you have been watching them."

"I haven't learned them yet," answered Mariflor.

"I don't dance," asserted Marinela.

Impatient at these opposing murmurs, Olalla exclaimed:

"You're a pair of fools!"

Florinda smiled, wishing to appear less preoccupied, but she sought in vain for some pleasant remark to make; and as the ducks were paddling along the muddy bank of the brook, she commented absent-mindedly:

"There is almost no water for them."

"No; the flow is getting less every day with the drought, and in the pool lower down there is not

enough for the animals to wet themselves, either."

"If only it would rain!" sighed Mariflor, knowing that the rain was longed for as a contingent blessing.

The three girls raised their eyes doubtingly toward the flaming sky as it curved in imperturbable serenity above the village, and then they turned them toward the street, which, silent and barren as a public square, led toward the open fields along the light furrow of the brook between the pebbles.

The double row of houses, standing silently in their places with a certain air of urban solemnity, was interrupted here and there by garden fences, barnyard gates, and junctions with other streets, which also lay broad, warm, and sleeping.

"It looks as if there is not a soul in the town," said Mariflor, overcome by the profound depression of such solitude.

"They are all taking their siestas, girl; at the time for saying the rosary, and afterward at the dance, you shall see how many people there will be, just as on other Sundays."

And Olalla, usually so calm and self-possessed, seemed to have forgotten to gather her ducks together, until finally a thirsty dog with lolling tongue came seeking a drink in the wretched brooklet, and the creatures waddled out in alarm, quacking up the banks with stupid flurry. After having slaked his thirst the cur began to bark furiously, and when the girls turned their heads, seeking the reason for the disturbance, they saw Ramona leaning over the barnyard fence.

"It's quarter of two," she warned. "If you're going to go over to say the rosary——"

At this moment the church bell began to ring.

The dog pattered off toward the open country, uttering loud growls at the sudden appearance of Ramona, while the girls and the ducks started for home.

There was no other sign of life along the quiet street except the slender thread of the brooklet, and a rag of doubtful whiteness fluttering in the distance as the announcement and sign of a tavern.

As the three girls entered the deep hole of the kitchen, they felt a penetrating coolness in the midst of the dense darkness. But in the mass of shadows and smoke Olalla promptly discovered la Chosca squatting on the floor in the ashes, taking loud sips and voracious mouthfuls from the mysterious substance she was extracting from an earthen pot.

Tía Dolores had concealed herself on the bench where the servant usually slept. There she lay on the miserable couch, overcome by lethargy or by sleep.

"What are you doing there, grandmother?" the girl asked in amazement. "Are you still sleeping? Aren't you coming to church with us?"

She replied, rising to her feet:

"Yes, I'm coming."

Her voice also seemed to come from very far away, like the sudden flash that sometimes shone in her eyes.

To-day the summoning bell rang with more subtle vibrations. Something had happened to it; it was announcing some extraordinary event; it possessed

a double meaning concealed in its pealing, which seemed especially insinuating in its final strokes: Ding—ding—dong—— What secrets was the bell shouting out? Mariflor was asking herself this while she was finishing dressing, and while her desires were taking wing like larks.

The three Maragatan women were very elegant, for as a relic of the one-time opulence of the family, tía Dolores cherished the rich garments of the region; woolen petticoats, skirts, scarfs, earrings, aprons, and other decorations of much beauty and worth, but of no value for the satisfaction of the avarice of tío Cristóbal, as were the fields and the oxen.

Marinela, in her Sunday best ever since very early in the morning, waited in the corner while the others finished dressing, trying not to be in the way in Florinda's tiny room, the only one in the house in which entered light and sunshine.

Just as they were about to leave the house the niece of the curate came rushing over, a mantilla over her head and her cheeks flaming.

"How late you are!" she said. "I have come to get you." And she added in an impatient explosion of confidence:

"Haven't you heard the news? A gentleman from Madrid has arrived at my uncle's house; he writes books and songs, and he talks a great deal about Mariflor."

"Do you know him?" exclaimed Marinela in stupefaction, realizing that her blue-eyed stranger had appeared.

Mariflor, with accelerated pulse, her heart beating wildly, murmured:

"He came with us on the train."

"Yes, that is true," corroborated Ascensión. "So he was saying during luncheon, and as I waited on the table I couldn't help hearing everything he said."

Olalla impassively concealed her impressions, but the changing pupils of Marinela sparkled like two emeralds.

"Isn't he crazy?" she questioned.

When she told the niece of the curate about her strange adventure at noon, Ascensión replied, with a laugh:

"Nonsense! What an idea you have about his saying his prayers! Why, the gentleman you speak of is in his right mind; of course he is, and he is a very good talker, and fine looking besides."

"We are going to be late," passively murmured Olalla.

Stirred by this opportune warning they left the room and again crossed through the shadows of the passageway and the kitchen, and by going out the front door avoided a circuitous route to the church. Neither beside the hearth nor on the bench was there a human figure this time; the deserted and silent house crouched humbly in the sunshine.

CHAPTER XI

THE WANDERING MUSE

"THERE'S going to be a show!"

"There's going to be tight-rope walking! Can we go?"

"Tell mother to let us go!"

"Tell her yourself!"

While really wishing to please the youngsters, Olalla pretended to be angry, and she complained aloud so that her mother should hear:

"Goodness, but you're never tired of teasing! As far as I'm concerned, you're altogether in the way here!"

"And in the morning there won't be anybody to remind them about going to school," said Ramona in yielding tones.

"Oh, I'll see that they start all right."

The three chubby, good-natured faces of the youngsters revealed an unaccustomed uneasiness, because the hope of attending a "show" in Valdecruces was something absolutely marvelous, capable of arousing the whole pueblo.

No one knew what untoward events had led the unfortunate actors along these poor Maragatan trails. The fact was that just at twilight a wagon had driven up to the crossroads, had stopped at a strategic corner, and from it had descended strange

personages, goods and chattels, animals and costumes. Out of the perambulating shelter came three old men and a woman, two girls, two boys, and a young gallant; several dogs barked, a monkey screeched, a parrot squawked, two miserable horses and a mule whinnied; it was, in fact, a veritable Noah's ark that had made its appearance.

The amazement of a crowd of youngsters who witnessed the arrival spread throughout the village, and the sluggish tranquillity of its citizens was aroused into an unusual state of animation.

After the dance, when the Sunday crowd was leaving in a peaceful procession, upon learning the news they hurried off in groups toward the cross-roads, and, standing at a distance with a certain precaution, they commented upon the singular visit.

Beside the wagon a few lights were flickering like will-o'-the-wisps, and the jugglers, with an activity inconceivable to the astonished public, had already obtained from Uncle Cristóbal, the justice of the peace, the license for holding a performance that very night.

With great noise and clamor, a drum and a bugle announced with ear-splitting and never-to-be-forgotten resonance the extraordinary performance, which was to take place at nine o'clock sharp.

The announcement was heralded through the streets by a speech made in the center of the square by the youngest of the three old men. The orator, after greeting the "highly respected public" in a slightly foreign accent, dwelt upon the presentation of the famous "Wandering Muse" as the most remarkable of his exhibits, a lady mad with love, who

wandered over the world voicing her plaint, and who would proclaim her sorrows in "Magnificent verses" before the "illustrious audience." The people did not seem to quite take in the importance of the announcement, nor was it very curious concerning the wanderings of the Muse.

But, in addition, "Greek dances" were to be presented; difficult and dangerous gymnastic exercises; jesting of clowns, extraordinary feats by the "never before seen young Manfredo, tight-rope walker and necromancer."

So many exotic marvels, although scarcely understood, excited the "illustrious audience" as with the fascinating aroma of unfamiliar flowers. And the violent perfume of the novelty that kept the youngsters awake, impatiently swarming about Olalla, even vibrated in the accents of their mother, suddenly softening her voice. The girl took advantage of this favorable circumstance to ask, with the quiet tact of the rustic:

"Will you let us go?"

"You can go—— But you will go alone!"

"You come with us!"

"Let your grandmother go!"

It was necessary to consult the old woman in piercing tones, as if she had suddenly become deaf, but finally realizing she was invited to witness the "games of strolling players" she refused with a gloomy shake of her head and a cynical movement of her lips.

"Well, I'll go," murmured Ramona, glancing down at her mother-in-law with a frigid sniff.

When they looked for Mariflor to call her in to

supper, she responded from the garden, and she came with her face wreathed in smiles, making no effort to conceal the joyousness of her countenance.

The youngsters told her that they were all going to see the show, and the girl made an effort to shake off the keen prepossession of her joy in order to reason and to understand what was taking place. She repeated aloud what the others had said, wishing to assure herself of the truth of what she heard; and her accent sounded hoarse and sweet, laden with emotion.

When she spoke they all remained silent, overcome by the strong caress of tenderness which gushed forth like glowing fragrance in her trivial phrases. They looked at her in vague astonishment; she beamed and smiled without ceasing, as if she had just awakened to the realities of which she had been dreaming; she moistened bits of bread in the inevitable broth with the tips of her fingers, and, judging by the amount she ate, she seemed to be enjoying it.

The frugal collation had a new relish to-night, an unrecognized pinch of spice that stimulated the appetite and the thirst. Even the girl with the fastidious appetite and the ever-changing eyes ate hastily, with a new air of eagerness, as if the potato stew were a dainty of exquisite flavor.

The more inciting the relish of the supper, the more the kitchen became pervaded by silence. Then Mariflor was granted leisure to revive the precious memories of that afternoon, and as it were, with the tips of her thoughts she moistened bits of illusions in the sauce of joyousness.

The girl blessed the glorious moment in which

Don Miguel had said to her, as they were coming out of church:

"Here is that gentleman friend of yours," while Rogelio Terán, with a glowing and happy air, approached to greet her where she stood surrounded by her cousins.

As he did not recognize in Marinela the Maragatan girl he had found beside the fountain, the niece of the curate made the revelation, while she blushed violently, and the gallant made a few courteous remarks; then all together they slowly made their way toward the place where the dance was to be held.

Taking advantage of the narrowness of a street, Ascensión said officiously:

"You two go on ahead."

She coupled the enamored girl with the artist, taking Marinela's arm herself, and leaving Olalla in the rear with the priest.

In order to still the wild beating of her heart at this recollection, Mariflor took a sip of water from the very rim of the jar, and she was confused between the murmur of the happy words that still resounded in her ear and the plans and hopes that were stirring in her soul.

It was to her, the sorrowful creature abandoned to troubles and cares, to whom a gentleman of quality had said that afternoon:

"I love you, I love you! I dream of carrying you away in my arms some day far from Valdecruces; I want you to be happy, and to give me joy; I want to share life with you; you are my queen, you are my inspiration! Do you love me, Mariflor?"

"Yes, yes," she had replied in a transport of joy.

Mingled with the sentimental effusion that enchained her, filling her thoughts, and benumbing them with a divine and cordial warmth, floated the most indifferent visions in persistent apparitions; the blue cap of the twin baby girl that Rosenda Alonso was rocking on her knees; the severe profile of the couples dancing two by two, with lowered eyes keeping step to the clacking of the castanets; and the immobile face of tío Fabián, cracked and brown like a dry nutmeg.

La Chosca had the face of a nutmeg, too; and glancing at her in sudden curiosity, the girl felt an irresistible desire to laugh.

The servant sat at the table thrusting her spoon with measured strokes into the common dish with tía Dolores and Ramona. The three women sipped the broth and moistened their bread with deliberate moderation, neither speaking nor exchanging glances, like unacquainted travelers brought together on their journey by hunger and thirst to enjoy the shadow of a tree and the coolness of a fountain.

Mariflor discovered these women as if they were creatures she had never seen before, who were not related to her by ties of blood, by race, or by origin.

The broth in their plates for moistening the bread having become exhausted, the diners rose and left the table, and Mariflor was surprised by her own voice when she said:

"Good-by, grandmother!"

The night rolled on silent and destitute of stars. At twilight a subtle mist, delicate and luminous

in its bath of crepuscular light, had overspread the pale, colorless sky. As its shadow fell over the plain the white film rested upon the horizon like a cool mantle, lighted by the splendid glow of the full moon; gentle gusts of wind that seemed to be praying along the roadway lent a springtime charm to the night.

The audience, composed of women and children, with an occasional old man by way of rare exception, which had gathered to see the performance, took care to glance at the sky as often as at the tattered carpet converted into a stage beneath the flickering glow of a few torches.

"It seems to me as if the wind is blowing from the direction of Ancares," announced Olalla with rejoicing.

"Yes, there are some rather cool breezes blowing," corroborated Ramona.

Her voice, as bitter as ever, seemed to include in its brusque modulation a violent desire which was shared with feverish eagerness by the assemblage; anxiety and longing caused every lip to stammer with inward hope:

"The wind is blowing from Ancares!"

After this happy augury their eyes turned toward the north and scrutinized the clouds above the village on the side from which rain was expected.

"Gentlemen, attention!" shouted the stage director, as if realizing that the thoughts of the audience were wandering from the extraordinary spectacle. "The marvelous work of young Manfredo is about to begin."

The Grecian dances had already been presented;

they proved to be a forlorn dance filled with strange figures and contortions given by a much underclad girl and a youth dressed as an Aragonese rustic.

He was, no doubt, that same necromancer and tight-rope walker who juggled with bottles and knives, plates and lanterns, throwing them into the air in complicated tricks only to catch them again with his hands, with his mouth, and with his feet.

Next he shuffled a deck of worn and greasy cards and made them travel through his body. He would hold one with extreme punctiliousness in the palm of his hand, saying to it very courteously:

"Pass, my pretty; pass, little one, pass——"

And in response to the endearing request, he would extract it from the toe of his shoe, exclaiming complacently:

"It has passed!"

The audience for the greater part was familiar with no other artifice than the rustic plays by the shepherds, given at New Year, on stilts in the snow, and they were really astounded.

"It seems like some sort of paganism," murmured Ramona with suspicion.

"It surely does!" said Rosicler who sat beside her in deep absorption.

An echo of these words, condensed into a note of hostility, swept over the gathering:

"Those fellows must be sorcerers!"

The dead waters of every eye became rippled by a gust of superstitious passion.

At that moment Don Miguel appeared in the little plaza with his sister, his niece, and the gentleman who had been accompanying them all the after-

noon, and had held an unusually long conversation with Mariflor Salvadores.

The new arrival approached the group formed by the audience, and the stranger managed to reach the side of Florinda, while the curate seemed to be explaining some very difficult matter to Ramona, to judge by the way she dilated her eyes with an expression of eagerness to understand; at last she glanced at her niece who was in silent conversation with the gentleman, and she shrugged her shoulders with a brusque sign of indifference; but her stare, fixed with firm obstinacy upon the stage, no longer took in the different figures, nor did her tormented imagination receive new impressions: the poor woman's dull and obtuse mind was filled to overflowing by the brief phrases of the priest.

After a complicated series of dexterous performances, young Manfredo, with many bows, requested the "respected audience" to applaud. But these poor people, who did not know how to applaud, remained dull and serious in the presence of the courteous gymnast.

The moment did not seem opportune for passing the petitionary plate; and the women were filled with amazement by this sudden action on the part of the stage director.

Every hand was empty, and the general astonishment made evident how sincere was the conviction that actors were creatures who do not feel either hunger or weariness, and have no other mission in the world than to roll about in a well-filled cart for the sake of amusing people.

"Gentlemen, we are poor artists!" pleaded the

leader with his Italian accent and his sorrowful face.

A gust of surprise weakly stirred the sleeping sentiment of the gathering; but their faces remained impassive before the sorrows of others.

Rogelio Terán contemplated the scene in astonishment, perhaps without realizing that in not one of those pockets was there a single copper.

The offering made by the curate and the stranger vibrated alone, with a hollow tinkling, in the empty plate.

At the glitter of the silver, a feverish activity reanimated the artist. The young man asked tío Chosco, the gravedigger, for his hat, and without hesitation he extended the wretched object; it was gray and worn, cracked and broken along the brim, while the crown was bound by a cord with dangling tassels.

The old man impassively revealed his venerable garnacha, or long hair, which he wore in unconscious imitation of the graceful fashion of the Goths; and the necromancer drew forth from the Maragatan's hat a handful of dollars; he jingled the coins with a pleasing tinkle, and he almost hypnotized the audience by the unaccustomed ring of the vulgar metal.

Before the interest aroused by so marvelous a feat should subside, the announcement was made, accompanied by trumpet blasts, of the appearance of "the Wandering Muse"; and young Manfredo himself, now without a single dollar in his hands, approached along the carpet with an air of extreme gallantry and presented the lady.

She was small, delicate, and pretty; she looked like a child attired as a lady.

Her dark hair hung loose, and she was dressed in mourning, with an extravagant décolletage, a glitter of spangles, and an overdress of filmy tulle. In her childish face there was an air of debility and languor; her eyes, expressive and sorrowful, seemed to be pleading in a mute language for clemency; her little bare arms, which she moved about during her pathetic oration, seemed to open, as if in demand of an embrace, with the desolate longing of one who experiences infinite need of repose and assistance.

Garbed in mourning she advanced between the smoking torches with a visionary and gloomy air, and began to recite:

"I am a woman, small and weak.
As a dowry I was given
The sweet and grievous burden
Of an immense heart.
In this heart, all lonely spaces,
And forests and deserts,
Has been born a great, tremendous love,
A love colossal, gigantic;
A love that overflows the earth
And invades the heavens——
I go through life exhausted with weariness,
Bending beneath the weight
Of this desire, bound for that new horizon
That my hope discerns;
Some quiet realm wherein to rest,
And where I may throw off,
In bold and victorious words,
The oppression of my secret.
I long for a world that does not exist,
That world of which I dream,
Where the echo of my songs may encounter
Spaces and silences;

A world that will give me refuge, and will listen
to me;
I seek it, and I find it not!"

The final strophe rang out like a sob, and rolled forth over the calm night with such compelling profundity that the errant plaint seemed as if hurled from some new world, from the silent and spacious world for which that restless and overflowing heart so yearned.

Florinda and the poet, stirred by the earnestness and appeal of the amorous romance, looked into each other's eyes with profound anguish. Even the impassive villagers seemed to feel in some remote realm of their rude natures a strange contact as with breezes or with wings, an unfamiliar sensation of impatience and longing.

This sentimental whirlwind raged and stormed within the breast of Marinela with the impetus of the mighty swell of a tempestuous sea.

From midday until the moment in which she had seen this stranger with Mariflor, speaking to her with eyes and lips in a divine language which, with marvelous intuition, she knew how to translate, she had been obsessed by an unfamiliar sense of dread.

And to-night, shaken by contradictory sentiments, perturbed by strange impulses, she suddenly realized that her heart was beating naked to the air of the haunting stanzas like a tree stripped of its foliage by a violent hurricane.

With dizzy haste the ardent voice of the young actress had loosed the vestments of shadows and ignorance bound about the stirring thoughts of the girl, and she saw standing clearly revealed all the

bitter ferment of her delirium, all the chaos of her sweet dreams; it seemed to her that the others were staring in amazement at that frightful spiritual nakedness, the motive of her terror, and she covered her shame-reddened face with her handkerchief. She was wounded by the incurable disease of love described by the verses! Like the errant muse, she, too, was possessed of an infinite yearning, of bleeding sorrows in her immense heart!

This cruel fact entered into her nature with a vague sense of comprehension, as through a dream. Perhaps she might succeed in shaking off so frightful a nightmare by arousing from obscurity her soul wherein the religious vocation, vacillating and confused in the mists that served as modest vestments for her unfathomed sentiments, glowed as a celestial lamp.

The elocutionist again approached the stage. The director and the young gallant whispered a few words to her, encouraging her, no doubt, to try to overcome the indifference of the audience with a new recitation; and the girl, obedient and humble, again extended her tremulous little arms and, her face upturned toward the clouds, began to lament with a heart-rending expression of helplessness:

"Everything has been already spoken! How late I come!
Along the deep pathways of life
Have passed the wandering poets
Trolling out their songs;
They sang of love, of forgetfulness,
Of desires and perfidies,
Of pardons and revenges,
Of sorrows and of joys.

For centuries and centuries, all over the broad world
The floating song
Rose to the mountains, descended to the hills,
Whispered through the forests;
Crossed seas and rivers, weeping and lamenting
On the winds and storms;
It moaned in the deserted garden,
In the withered flowers,
In all things poor and humble, in the tombs,
In the souls of gloomy natures.
All the world is a lament, all is a hymn;
All the world is a sob and a poem—
And I come, after this torrent
Which the universe engirdles,
With a new song upon my lips
And without the power to voice it:
For there are no words left, nor any
Form of imagery;
Nor strophes nor harmonies
That do not already ring through the penumbrous valley,
And rise to the crests,
And greet the abysses,
Burdening the measures
Of human voices
And the sacred strains of lyres.
In this world filled with songs
There is no longer place for mine!
Frenzied and silent, I bear it within my lips
Without the power to voice it."

Beneath the flowery corners of her kerchief Marinela burst into a flood of bitter tears, with a delirious murmur of words, as if also on her lips, a mute, wild song of impossible strains were being stifled.

"What's the matter, child?" the niece of Don Miguel asked her in amazement.

Roundabout the weeping girl began a movement

of alarm, and her mother shook her harshly and violently by one arm.

"Her usual complaint!" she murmured.

Olalla crowded close with blanched cheeks, when the curate, as if he understood the cause of the sudden grief, and considered it just and necessary, ordered them to let her cry.

The poet and Mariflor looked at the priest understandingly, while the other neighbors murmured that this fit of weeping was a symptom of an incurable decline.

The "Muse" handed around the petitionary plate with the indifferent air of custom; perhaps she was somewhat touched that night by the unusual appearance of the audience, by its grave and silent air of expectation.

Seen at close range, she seemed older and more saddened; her stature increased, and the lines of her face seemed more weary and more pronounced.

She flung a searching glance roundabout her, and in order to bring the plate within reach of the curate and Terán, she mingled with that strange group where even the children spoke in lowered tones.

"Why is she crying?"

At her sweet, warm accent the afflicted girl began to tremble, and then she uncovered her face and caressed the figure of the other woman with the moist topaz light of her eyes.

As no one made a reply, the elocutionist, shaking the dark veil of her hair, said again:

"Why is she crying?"

"Because she is deeply stirred by your verses," finally said Terán.

He laid another gift in the plate and demanded with a smile:

"Where do you come from?"

"I don't know—from anywhere—from the road," replied the wanderer.

"What is your name?"

"Muse."

"That must be a nickname," ventured a timid voice.

"And where did you learn those touching verses?" added the young man.

The black-clad girl shook her head with a peculiar gesture, shrugged her shoulders, and replied with an ambiguous phrase:

"Somewhere——"

Her bare arm seemed to extend with haughty disdain toward every point of the universe.

"Do you wish to give me a copy of them?" said Terán, filled with curiosity.

"Papa has them."

"Papa," who was the manager, had hastened to approach. He searched diligently in his pockets and then drew out a few typewritten pages, and after separating them, he offered them, murmuring:

"These are not the only ones that we have sold, caballero."

The poet understood, and he paid while the audience was filing out in silence; and Don Miguel, undisconcerted by the exaggerated décolletage, spoke a few calm and pleasant words to the elocutionist.

Marinela, who had ceased weeping, was clinging to the arm of Ascensión, becoming ever more ashamed, weakened by some unexplainable lassitude of her limbs and of her spirit, as in the crisis of a sudden illness. She was still obsessed by the fear of finding that heart of hers, so over-burdened with ambitions and chimeras, aching with tenderness, filled with an inexpressible song, standing revealed.

Ramona glanced at her out of a corner of her eye, wondering confusedly what had been the cause of the aggravation of her customary grief; and she stared with special interest at Mariflor's gallant escort, unable, in the cloudiness of her spirit, to see the reason why the curate should have told her that this was an honorable gentleman inspired by the best of intentions toward the girl, and whom it was necessary to treat with extreme discretion. In the dim prison of her intelligence her instinct impelled Ramona to look upon the stranger as a menace.

The strolling players blew out the torches, gathered up the carpet, and sought the shelter of their perambulating dwelling which was dimly visible in the desolation of the plaza between the dwindling glow of two lights.

In a trice they had gathered up the benches and boxes on which a portion of the audience had been seated, and again the cross was left alone, standing guard in the silence, extending its arms with infinite indulgence directly toward the corner where the poor adventurers had retired to sleep.

Divided into groups, the questioning crowd turned in the direction of their homes with a sensation of strangeness at having abandoned them, and

of amazement at wandering at such hours along the streets lying asleep in the night.

The presence of Don Miguel compelled them to reject the supposition of witchcraft connected with this unusual nocturnal festivity, and the hallucination of a miracle oppressed every mind and heart at so unusual an exhibition of skill as that revealed by the wandering actress who had so suddenly made her appearance almost like an apparition in this forgotten corner of the heath.

Olalla walked on, dragging her little brothers by the hand, while they turned their eyes heavy with sleep toward the place where the actors remained, and Don Miguel's family accompanied that of the Salvadores, the stranger bending eagerly over Mariflor, fascinated by her beauty.

The breezes, which the people in their eagerness for rain, had looked upon as winds from Ancares, were nothing but the sighs of the breeze moistened with the natural coolness of night; and upon seeing the white curtain over the indigo canopy drawn aside, the women sighed in company with the wind, and all eyes turned disconsolately toward the blue horizon.

The family separated on the plaza where the stranger had first met Marinela; after the exchange of farewells, spoken with not a little timidity by some lips, each group disappeared down a different street, and, like an echo of eternal human anxieties, the plaintive tremor of the fountain persisted alone and sleepless in a sympathetic beam of moonlight.

CHAPTER XII

THE ROSE OF THE HEART

UPON arriving at Valdecruces Rogelio learned of the situation of the Salvadores family; he heard also that the marriage of Florinda to her cousin Antonio was the foundation of a hope for the rehabilitation of the home, and that the poor girl, enamored of the poet, was existing in a frantic struggle, fighting heroically to favor her relatives without trampling upon the rights and privileges of her own heart.

Upon hearing these revelations from the lips of Don Miguel, Rogelio felt extreme sympathy, and in an outburst of tenderness and gratitude he determined to hasten his plans, to marry Florinda at once, and forever free her from the sorrows and servitude of the paramo.

Beside the noble figure of the priest, in that atmosphere of austerity and sacrifice, the poet's compassion became unbounded; he beheld the beautiful maiden condemned to slavery in a life utterly contrary to her education and her inherent refinement; he admired her with both the instinct of the artist and the sympathy of the man in love; he exalted her virtues and qualities, elevating them to the height of his imagination, and he promised himself with quixotesque nobility "never to par-

take of bread at table" until he had liberated his lady from such toilsome captivity and made her very happy.

But, once he was alone by himself again, a certain gust of uneasiness swept through the hidalgo's mind. Rogelio was not rich; after a sorrowful childhood, after a cruel adolescence, combated by many troubles, his art and his pen, united in an effort perhaps not very constant, but firm and well directed, had begun to climb the arduous hill of fame; but he could not as yet redeem the estate at Valdecruces as could the other man, nor even offer his beloved more than an insecure future. Would it, then, make her happy to join Mariflor's fate to his?

Rogelio always looked at life from the poetic point of view, from the heights, without considering the humble realities until through bad luck he stumbled upon them. On deciding upon the marriage he could find no other refuge for their joint existence than the silent cottage in Villanoble, where his mother had died, the lonely house ever shaken by the voices of the sea. No doubt it would be a charming corner wherein to spend a honeymoon, and to await prosperous times in the arms of love; but perhaps those times would never come; perhaps some day the husband might be compelled to leave the home, as had his father, a victim also of love and poverty, who went away never to return, although he left behind him a woman and a child.

Sinking into the abyss of the uncertain future, the youth re-lived the memories of his childhood, beside his careworn, anxious mother who searched day and night the path along which the absent

father might return. He recalled with the obsession of a nightmare the immeasurably wide-open eyes of the unhappy woman when a vessel bound for Santander would appear upon the ocean's horizon, and the infinite despair pictured on his mother's face, which ever constantly searched the ships and the waves. After time and tears had beclouded the light of those sweet and patient eyes, the woman would search for the boy that she might point out the illusory smoke of a steamer looming in the fog, and ask anxiously, as did the familiar "Sister" in the popular tale of Bluebeard:

"Rogelio, my son, what do you see?"

The poet trembled now, as, with his heart oppressed by inexplicable tenderness, he repeated the reply he had so often lisped:

"I see nothing but the waters and the clouds."

For nothing in the world would he cause innocent lips to form that question, or childish ears to hear that echo, the symbol of such tremendous martyrdom, reiterated throughout an entire lifetime.

Terán was superstitious; he believed in sins through inheritance. More than once, thinking of the inconstancy of his father and of his own weaknesses, he had avoided having a sweetheart, saying to himself:

"I would be the cause of her misfortune."

And many a time when a new love had begun to move him, he had looked upon it with alarm, as if he feared to discover in the depths of his heart the germ of some hereditary fatality. Although this love was so strong and tender that he had come

to consider it definite and free from all chance of infidelity, nevertheless the same fears had pursued him as he was nearing Valdecruces.

At last he had silenced his doubts and uncertainties; he persisted in the idea of the marriage, and so he told Mariflor; but she, filled with anxieties, irresolute, confessed to him, with violent flushes, that she could not marry without relieving her people from the serious exigencies which had overtaken them; she had promised it, she had given her word; it was a case of conscience and honor. Florinda's determination glowed with such sublime sincerity, with such generous aspirations, that the gentleman maintained a reverent silence.

She did not even remotely allude to her cousin; but, with singular delicacy, she limited herself to expressing her frank opinion that she must intervene favorably in the family misfortunes.

"I have made up my mind to remedy them," she said. "It is a duty imposed upon me."

"Even at the expense of your own happiness?" asked Rogelio in amazement.

"Not at the expense of it, but before realizing it, yes. I have sworn it! I must not think of my own happiness without first relieving the situation of this home. How? I do not know. I trust in God. In the meantime I must forget self."

She voiced her determination with unflinching firmness; but the wild rebellion of the sentiments in the dim light of her eyes spoke with such eloquence that the poet smiled, sure of the passion with which he was loved.

When he told the priest of this interview, a grate-

ful surprise overspread the frank and open countenance of Don Miguel. Somewhat disconcerted, Terán wished to sound the inner thoughts of his friend; he associated his present attitude with the peculiar resistance of Mariflor, believing that he could perceive something more in the situation than he already knew; but he could make no inquiry because the priest suddenly cloaked himself in the reserve peculiar to that region, that atmosphere of calmness, caution, and mystery.

Don Miguel had supposed Mariflor to be so interested in the poet, he knew her to be so loving and impulsive, that he had expected to see her yield to the first demand of passion, concealing her desire for charity in the impenetrable recesses of her conscience. But when he learned that she had courageously placed conditions upon her own future for the benefit of others, a thrilling sense of admiration determined him to protect those good intentions which revealed heroic energy and perhaps providential design.

So, not long after, when Mariflor appeared at the house of the curate in quest of support and consolation, he encouraged her with extreme tenderness.

"Yes, I have made up my mind to wait," she said, "to look for the miracle. But if you only knew what I am suffering! Every day that passes falls upon my heart with frightful sorrow; I am trembling for the fate of all those I love. Am I doing wrong, perhaps, in longing for happiness for myself?"

"No, my daughter. I also wish you to be happy; but we must take into consideration——"

"What! Do you no longer trust in Rogelio?"

"I do not trust in happiness!" exclaimed the priest, recalling the experience of the poet's mother. "Besides," he added, "if you wish to help your relatives——"

"Yes; I am looking for the miracle."

"Rogelio would accomplish it too late. Never, perhaps. The situation is critical. Your cousin Antonio——"

"I do not intend to marry my cousin!" the girl protested impatiently.

As the priest kept silent, she covered her face with her hands.

"You do not encourage me!" she moaned, "you have forsaken me!"

Without allowing himself to be carried away by compassion, the priest ventured a word of encouragement:

"No, I have not forsaken you, my child. I encourage you to be brave, to see clearly, to choose the shortest path for reaching heaven, to distrust the happiness you are seeking on earth. Poor child! I must prepare you—you who dream too much!"

"But is not dreaming living in the spirit?"

"Yes; when one does not overlook the duties of implacable realities. However, do not worry; I will send for your cousin. We will sound his will, his intentions."

"But we must tell him that I will not marry him," repeated the girl.

"I do not intend, my daughter, for you to sacri-

fice yourself. Do as you wish. Rogelio is ready to marry you. Consider it well!"

"I have sworn before anything else to help my family."

"I release you from that vow."

"But I feel so sorry for all of them!" said Mariflor in an outburst of ardent sympathy. "I am not an egoist. I only wish I had unlimited money so that I could give it with filled hands to my relatives, to strangers, to all those who suffer, to all those who are struggling against poverty. But to marry that man only because he is rich—a man whom I don't even know, whom I don't love, why, *señor cura*, he doesn't know me, either; he doesn't love me, either! Why should he marry a poor girl like me? On the other hand, it is his duty to help grandmother, who is of his own blood, who is his grandmother, as well as mine. When we speak to his heart he certainly must take pity upon her the same as we do! Isn't that so? Yes, send for him; send for him at once! I will tell him all this—— when he hears me, when he sees us, if he is a Christian, if he feels for us, he will give us his support, he will save our estate. And it will not be necessary for me to sell my heart for a handful of money."

To the ears of Don Miguel, accustomed to the lamentations of every human being, words like these were not frequent; to him every woman came stoically and firmly bearing her cross upon the ever living tide of misfortune, with no time nor courage for pitying the sorrows of others. Ever more filled with admiration for the soul of Mariflor, the curate allowed himself to be carried away on the consoling

breezes brought by this girl from the land which lives to the land which is dying, as if it were a gentle gust of compassion cultivated in the heart of civilization in order to implant its seeds in the desert waste.

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed Don Miguel, "who knows! I'll send for your cousin. I will send for him at once, as you wish."

"And will he come?"

"I think so."

"Before that particular day in August?"

"Yes; next week. I want your mind to be set at ease. Besides, Uncle Cristóbal is threatening to attach the property, and some decision must be taken at once."

"Yesterday the mules and the donkey were taken away."

"I know it."

"And la Chosca went, too."

"I did not know that."

"We could not pay her the wages due, and as it has always been her duty to take care of the animals, why, poor thing, she went along with them. She went off, crying, behind the three mules and the donkey; as they started for the first time bound for a new shelter they all turned their heads back toward the stable; it was pitiful!"

"I did not try to prevent the spoliation," said the perturbed priest, "because it is the least harmful of all those that impend; really a drove of animals, no matter how small it may have become, without an income of one's own, and without freight to haul, becomes burdensome rather than otherwise."

"Grandmother kept them through affection and also through a bit of pride; it is so hard to come to reduced circumstances! Although it saddened me to see the animals leave, in my heart I was glad that they were to change owners; they were, like la Chosca, almost starved to death. The poor woman really did not have enough to eat herself, and yet she tried her best to find food for them, driving them through the stubble, over the hills, through the fallow lands. Poor thing! She never had either a house or family; she and her father treated each other as if they were strangers."

"And so they are. Uncle Chosco no longer remembers that the unfortunate creature is his daughter. He was left a widower when she was born; he went off somewhere, and when he came back, poor, old, and crushed, they looked upon each other as strangers; she seemed old herself by that time."

"She has always lived in the most toilsome slavery."

"The charity of Valdecruces renders no better account of itself," sighed Don Miguel; and Florinda stammered:

"How can it?"

She was overcome by grief, her mind filled with trouble.

"And as far el Chosco," she insisted after a short pause, "you maintain him with your charity; and he has no other ambition in life than to bury his relatives one by one; he is only happy when he gets a sniff of the dead."

After a gloomy pause, Mariflor spoke again:

"Do you believe that Uncle Cristóbal will go so

far as to attach everything we have, and even throw us into the street?"

"He is capable of doing so," replied the curate. "But not at once," he added, seeing the girl turn pale. "We made an appraisement of the saddle animals, and with those you paid off the interest on the deferred payments."

"Interest upon interest? May the Virgin help me! Does my father know that things are in this condition?"

"I have recently written him telling him the whole truth, because the way your grandmother has kept it from him has been very prejudicial."

"She is as innocent as a child; she is ignorant and simple; if it were not for you the poor woman would be in the middle of the arroyo by this time."

"Now, with the yoke of oxen," suggested the curate mildly, as if he feared he might wound with his words, "I believe that the avaricious money lender will be quite well satisfied."

"The oxen too? Oh, how that is going to hurt grandmother! And tell me, I will not be frightened; tell me if the house is in danger; that is the thing that worries me most; that we may be thrown out of my father's home."

"No, no; I will make every possible effort to avoid it," replied the curate, deeply touched.

"You have already done too much!"

Florinda's eyes spoke these words even more earnestly than did her lips.

"I wish you would tell me," she added with a deep flush of humiliation, "how much we owe that man, and in what form! I understand some-

thing about accounts, and I must help my father through you."

In his perplexity, the curate did not know what to say, he was so fearful of overwhelming the girl with deeper worries. His admiration increased as he saw her rise above her own afflictions in order to mitigate the sorrows of the common home. However, he promptly came to a decision; Mariflor's firm and scrutinizing expression permitted of no truce.

"The affair is more intricate than you imagine," he began. "The past month a new loan which Uncle Cristóbal made on the house, the furniture, the garden, the piece of ground near town, and a parcel of irrigable ground in the wheat-growing district of Urdiales, fell due: three thousand pesetas for all of that, and it was not a little, considering what property is worth around here, and what the usury of the money lender might cause one to expect. But don't be alarmed; this incredible sum not only was guaranteed by a mortgage on the best pieces of property in the town but it was increasing in a scandalous way. The greater his 'generosity' the better business it was for him. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"As your grandmother never paid the interest, and Uncle Cristóbal was compounding it, the debt threatened to double itself. That has happened more than once, and in that way your relative had come into possession of a great part of this estate before I came to Valdecruces."

"And my father knew nothing about it!" exclaimed Florinda disconsolately.

Don Miguel was overcome by a strong impulse

to confidence, gratified at finding at last a reasonable person in the Salvadores family.

"The usurer," he continued, "allowed the months to run on without bringing pressure to bear, while the interest was making him rich; the property guaranteed the deferred payments. But at last he calculated that he had a perfect right to take over everything, and he refused to wait; he wants the house, the furniture, and the pieces of property mentioned in the mortgage, or the twelve thousand reales. We have valued the oxen at two thousand, and he grants time for the rest if the animals are turned over to him at once."

"They cost my father a thousand pesetas!"

"Yes; it is a fine yoke of oxen, but it has worked hard and has been misused; I see no other possible way for obtaining a breathing spell, which will have to be short, very short, so that the frightful interest will not begin to climb again, and in order that you can free yourselves once for all from this unjust exploitation."

"Yes, yes," said Florinda, "but after that what can we do with a small estate, unaccustomed to work as we are? If my father does not have good luck, I foresee a bad end to our troubles; it will be more difficult to overcome them in the future than to remedy them now. Ten thousand reales can easily be found," she added optimistically.

"Do you think so?" Don Miguel asked in surprise.

"It seems so to me," murmured the startled girl, suddenly beginning to wonder whether she had spoken foolishly; in the generosity of youth she

could count thousands of reales with the utmost ease.

So, when the curate declared firmly: "I do not know of any one who has so much money available," she stammered despondently:

"Does it seem to you so large a sum?"

"To give away or to lend to a poor person it seems to me a fabulous amount. I am quite sure of it!"

"Have you ever tried to borrow it?" asked the girl with the inquietude of sudden suspicion.

"If I could find those miserable cuartos as easily as you say, would your debt remain standing? I do not believe in the existence of money; I do not know where it keeps itself hidden away; it never makes its appearance anywhere when one searches for it for a work of charity; through not having it in my early youth I suffered the most cruel agonies."

A sorrowful wave of recollections seemed to sweep like a cloud across the curate's forehead.

"I went through the university on charity, never knowing the joy of having a peseta in my possession; I came here and took upon myself the adversities of this town without being able to remedy them, and when your troubles touched my heart to the depths I was so insane as to believe in the existence of the illusive metal; in my haste to save you I even went so far as to pay Uncle Cristóbal with Ascensión's dowry."

"What?"

"And now the money does not make its appearance either for you or for me!"

He rose hastily from his chair, overcome with

regret at having allowed the confidence to escape him; Mariflor in her despair, had risen also.

In the deep silence of the afternoon the shadows began to descend and to invade the room; they were wafted in through the open balcony from the violet-tinged sky.

"Don't worry, little one," replied the curate for the sake of saying something. "I have been very stupid; I did not mean to tell you all this."

With facile readiness Florinda associated with the last revelations made by her friend a certain phrase which had surprised her before: "a new loan," and now she understood the actual meaning of these words.

"So your tremendous sacrifice proved to be futile?"

"Tremendous?" smiled the priest with generosity.

"So that," repeated Mariflor like a somnambulist whirling through space, "it amounts to ten and twelve—twenty-two thousand? That is indeed a fabulous sum! There is no one who will have it available."

"Child, it's not so bad, after all! You are laboring under a delusion."

The girl would not listen to reason; in the velvety sweetness of her eyes dilated the fear of urgent need; twenty-two thousand reales! A sum so great that perhaps it did not exist in the whole world! Suddenly she felt Don Miguel's hands on her shoulders.

"This will all be arranged, you understand?" said the priest. "This will be arranged very quickly; I have not yet exhausted all my resources for obtain-

ing this money; I have explained myself awkwardly without meaning to do so; I am making you suffer in an intolerable manner."

"Even though it were to be arranged through a direct miracle from God," replied the girl persistently, "grandmother would immediately do the same thing over again. I don't know how it is that while living in such poverty she needs to mortgage everything she has over and over again; I no longer believe it will be possible for me to bolster up a house that is falling."

"But, see, your grandmother is a genuine misfortune. In the confused darkness of her existence but a single love has flowered—that of the mother; and this solitary light has befuddled the poor woman instead of illuminating her. She has divided her blind idolatry between her children, while death busied itself snatching them away from her, and, through one of these weaknesses common to us ordinary mortals, later in life she concentrated her hopes upon one of the two that were left to her."

"My Uncle Isidoro," sighed Florinda.

"Yes, because your father married an outsider. The favorite one, having bad luck in his mercantile business affairs, emigrated three years ago, accompanied by the same bad luck that had clung to him here in Spain, and ever since then, whatever he asks of his mother she sends him, concealing from those of us who should prevent it that she is ruining all of you to the benefit of no one; because Isidoro, sick and dull, does not amount to anything."

"And who can cure this mania?"

"I will cure it now that experience has warned

me; your father has finally granted me the legal authority to intervene whenever it may be necessary."

"Is it very long since that mortgage was renewed?" asked the girl, overcome by shame.

"A year. No sooner had I raised it than, behind my back, she wove the snare again."

"Did you pay a great deal of interest?"

"Not a great deal."

"Truly?"

"Child, you must not worry about it," evaded the priest, pained by the young woman's agitation.

But her suspicions aroused, and filled with alarm, wishing to know the entire magnitude of the disaster, she made gestures of incredulity; while at the same time that she asked the question she was walking toward the door, as if overcome by an impulse to take her flight before obtaining a categorical reply.

Don Miguel did not wish to let her leave so overwhelmed with grief.

"I have my plans," he said, still detaining her; "a program for a new life for all of you."

"What is it?"

"You are to marry."

"Marry whom?"

"Whoever you wish, whoever you love, *caràmba!* We will declare your grandmother incompetent; we will send Pedro out to earn his own living; Olalla and Ramona can work in the fields in order to support themselves, the old woman, and the children; we will try to get an endowment for Marinela so that she can enter the convent; that is, as a last

resort; in case your father should fail to have good luck—and provided that I should not win a prize in the lottery!"

The girl made an effort to smile.

"But to work in the fields would be a frightful thing for Olalla," she protested at last.

"And not for her mother?"

"For her, too, although she is more used to it."

"So much the worse for her! Poor woman! You do not seem to care particularly for her, but she amounts to a great deal."

Mariflor, quite surprised, added without defending her:

"Pedro is very young to have to leave home. An endowment for Marinela would be extremely difficult to find."

"So it seems that we cannot come to any such agreement," replied the holy man with a note of complaint in his voice.

"Forgive me, *señor cura!*" exclaimed Florinda with a flushed face. "May God repay you for all you have done, for all you are still doing for us! As soon as Antonio comes we will adopt measures to reimburse you."

Before finally taking her leave, concealing her flushed face behind the frame of the door, she added with a trembling voice:

"I have a few little gold rings, my mother's watch, and a bracelet, if you will accept them!"

She had clasped her hands in earnest supplication, and was almost at the point of sinking to her knees. His heart aching with compassion, the priest made a brusque and tender gesture.

At that instant the sound of footsteps in the yard was heard.

"It is Rogelio, just returned from Monredondo," warned Don Miguel.

Placing a finger on her lips as a sign of silence, she flung a grateful glance at the priest, said a hasty farewell, and dashed down the stairs.

Avoiding the stranger, she slipped into a little room where Ascensión, all curiosity over the confidential conversation in the study, sat sewing.

"What are you doing?" said Mariflor mechanically. She had dried her eyes, and in the dim light of the room she could better conceal the sign of her grief.

"You can see for yourself," replied Ascensión, unfolding a piece of blanket cloth with which she was making skirts.

"Are they for the trousseau?"

"Yes; this wool is of last year's shearing. It's a pleasure to make it up when one has actually seen it growing on the backs of the sheep!"

"Did you spin it yourself?"

"Yes; but before that a great deal has to be done to it. Each tuft is soaked, washed, opened, carded, and then spliced and spun; we do all that here; afterwards it is woven into cloth at Val de San Lorenzo."

"And when is the wedding to come off?"

"On our feast day in August, at the latest; the banns will be read next month."

"Then they will be read to-morrow for the first time."

"No; the following Sunday. But when is yours

to be? Were you not talking about it upstairs?" hinted Ascensión.

"No, I came over about grandmother's affairs. I'm not going to be married so soon."

Footsteps and voices could be heard issuing from Don Miguel's office, and the last flickers of light died away on the white walls of Ascensión's little room.

"You heard Don Rogelio come in just now, didn't you?" questioned Ascensión, folding up her sewing.

"Yes—I must be going; it's getting late."

"I will go with you as far as the fountain."

Ascensión Crespo y Fidalgo was a bright, pleasant Maragatan girl upon whom a slight contact with people other than her own had left a faint touch of joyousness in her words and in her mind; she possessed a diploma as a primary teacher which neither elevated her very high, nor set her apart morally from her native village, and yet it gave her a certain amount of distinction among the neighbors, aside from her prominence as niece of the curate and the promised bride of a well-to-do storekeeper.

Her mother, the priest's elder sister, had wished to live with him in Valdecruces, not alone in order that she might rule his home with affection, but also to avail herself of his companionship. Don Miguel and his sister had grown up together under the guardianship of an uncle who provided the youth with a career and bequeathed the girl landed property and some thousands of reales in addition. Being a widow when she received the inheritance, and the mother of two girls, she promptly married off

the elder, thanks to the fact of the inheritance, to a relative who was very well established; it proved to be but a short marriage, dissolved at the end of a year by the death of the newly married daughter. But the widower, with his fondness for the home, and for the dowry, did not long delay returning in quest of his young sister-in-law, Ascensión, and the mother, although still weeping for her ill-starred daughter, smiled at the good fortune of this other one, feeling convinced that a husband with money spells supreme felicity for a woman.

At the same time, this was the belief of the young Maragatan woman herself. Her short course in the normal school at Oviedo had failed to reveal new horizons to her, did not broaden her scope of vision, nor did it deeply perturb the natural repose of her mind; it did a great deal for her in making her manner of address less crude, in brightening her smile, and softening her voice; she still continued to write with incorrect orthography, and to read in the same singsong tones she had learned to employ at the village school; but her manners were easier, her words more direct, and a drop of worldly curiosity slipped gayly from her eyes to her lips without ever descending to her heart.

Lifted above the rude labor of the fields, with her school-teacher's resplendent diploma, and the advantageous marriage which was about to come off, the girl stood first in the admiration and the hearts of the people of the place until Florinda came. Without a trace of petty jealousy, she at once took it upon herself to share with her the glory of those subtile privileges; she considered it due her

superior position to receive the genteel stranger courteously, initiate her into the new customs, and, in fact, to do her the honors of the pueblo. Soon this good resolution became fortified by sympathy and curiosity. Florinda promptly made herself loved; the charm and sweetness of her character manifested themselves with irresistible attraction, and her slightly exotic air glowed in the eyes of the school-teacher like a far-flung greeting from the mundane novelties she had once experienced. Mariflor looked people directly in the eyes; she laughed aloud; she wore her glossy hair dressed in the fashion prevailing in the city; she had refined thoughts, brilliant ideas, which were revealed in her entire person with free and serene emotions. No girl in Valdecruces admired the stranger with more appreciation of her genuine worth than did the niece of Don Miguel.

Now, making their way toward the fountain, Florinda and Ascensión chatted with affable intimacy, each with her heart far away, and their youthful existences united against a background of mutual affection.

"So your banns are to be read next month?"

"The two times that still remain to be announced, yes, because the first banns were proclaimed in January, when we first became engaged."

"Ah! Is that the custom?"

"Naturally, child; so that every one will know that we are engaged!"

"Does he write to you often?" ventured Florinda.

"It is not the custom here."

"Not even once?"

"Not a single time."

"Hasn't he come to see you, either?"

"No; he will come the day before we're married, and the day after that he will go away again. My mother," the little teacher added proudly, "is giving me the furniture for the house and my dowry of four thousand pesetas, which is in my uncle's care."

Learning the amount, the terrifying sum, with blanched cheeks and troubled mind, Mariflor asked, in order to conceal her agitation:

"How do you know whether you love your fiancé or not when you have scarcely ever seen him?"

"Because he was good to my sister who is in heaven."

"Could you judge him in a single year, when he has been away all the time?"

"He was generous; he was a good provider!"

The laughter of the fountain interrupted the conversation, but Ascensión added, after having said good-by to her companion:

"And you, how is it that you love an outsider without ever having seen him except once during a trip on the train, without knowing anything about his kindred, or his purse?"

"I have talked with him a great deal, with his eyes and with his heart," stammered Florinda, somewhat confused. "I have read his books and his letters. Besides, why do you say that I love him?"

"I suppose so," smiled the teacher with pretensions of wisdom, and she added: "He is very good looking and elegant, he is easy of speech and has education—but those people of the pen usually have

no property. You would do better to marry Antonio."

The advice vibrated harshly against the murmur of the purling water, while Mariflor walked away with a smile on her lips, notwithstanding the heaviness of her heart.

In the profound calm of the early twilight it seemed to her that a growth of thorny vegetation was springing up beneath her feet, and that a sound of lamentation was moaning through the air. Upon gaining the house she sought refuge in the little garden, asking God to grant her serenity of spirit, consolation and fortitude. Concealed there in the only foliage in the inclosure, she suddenly felt a touch, as if of the wings of a butterfly, on her face; it was the petal of a bud fluttering away from the rosebush.

Her heart torn by ineffable compassion, Florinda took the petal in her hand, and, with an irresistible impulse, endeavored to return it to the delicate flower from which it had fallen; but her effort was futile, and she was overcome by inexplicable anguish; it was impossible to unite the dead petal to the living shoot; and she felt that, in the most relentless fashion, the fluttering rose of her own heart was also being stripped of its petals.

CHAPTER XIII

SUN OF JUSTICE

DAY after day the burning heat of the sun fell relentlessly upon the plain.

The signs of rain in the sky were so unpromising that the apprehension of a drought deepened to a certainty of inevitable danger to the scanty harvest of Valdecruces, and beneath the stern regimen of tío Cristóbal, turns at irrigating the crops were taken with exactitude, making the most of the waters of the temporary streams.

As Olalla had feared, the turn for the Salvadores family to irrigate their fields came at a time when they had not a cent with which to pay for help; and that morning at sunrise Ramona and her elder daughter, making no sound, diligently left the house and plodded heavily toward the rye fields with the implements necessary for banking up the water and making it run where they desired.

By this time none of the irrigable land belonging to the ever dwindling patrimony of tía Dolores remained in her possession except the two fields toward which the women were directing their steps; and now even these last remaining parcels were mortgaged to tío Cristóbal, who could not be persuaded to lend a copper upon the arid land, the *fanegadas* of Abranadillo and Ñanazales on the op-

posite side of the pueblo, which constantly stood in need of lying fallow because of their extreme sterility.

The wealthy old miser of Valdecruces owned lands adjoining those which were to be irrigated, and this year he seemed to be extremely anxious to benefit those of his unfortunate neighbors, reveling in the certainty of soon uniting the different lots into a single eminently desirable property, which should be the mistress of the harvest.

Old tío Cristóbal could not sleep that morning, and scarcely had the sun begun to warm the earth than the imposing, weather-beaten figure of the tall, ruddy man made its appearance in the outlying rye fields, hobbling along with halting step, wearing a broad sombrero with cord and tassels, wide breeches of homespun, coarse brown leggings, and a tightly fitting jacket under a colored waistcoat; he had on galoshes, and he was leaning upon a patriarchal staff. Shaded by white eyebrows, his little gray eyes peered from his spare face with its sunken mouth, distorted and insistent with a sort of ceaseless questioning.

This old Maragato, in comparison to the poverty of the region, was rich, and he was respected because of his money and authority, although his unrelenting avarice made him at the same time hated and feared. Despite his ninety-six years, he was still as firm and hard as an oak, and his presence everywhere inspired a certain uneasiness mingled with repulsion.

An only son, who was now an old man himself, had remained to tío Cristóbal at the time when he

had been left a widower; but this sole descendant, loaded down with children, was compelled to seek a living in humble tasks outside of Valdecruces, for the avaricious landowner did no more for his poverty-stricken offspring than to take one of his grandchildren to his house that she might wait upon him in the capacity of servant; and Facunda Paz, the young girl given shelter by her grandfather, never revealed a contented face at the dances, nor did she wear a skirt, an apron, or a jacket as handsome as that of her neighbors, or even of her own sisters, although the ancient trousseau of her grandmother, consisting of pinafores and bodices, satins and fine woolen cloths, was stowed away in the bottom of the locked chest, eaten by moths. Tío Cristóbal had worked for a period of years in Madrid as a shopkeeper and stock jobber on a small scale, established on one of the side streets near the Puerto de Toledo. When he was well along in years he married a wealthy girl of his native region and moved back to the village, but without foregoing his mercantile machinations; in this manner the imperious necessities of the humble neighborhood were exploited in obscure business deals, without compassion even for his own family, as in the case of tía Dolores, to whom he was related.

This old usurer did not love the soil, as do the women of the land of the Maragatos, with ardent and generous love that imparts salt to their tears and to their sweat for the fertilization of the furrow opened in the earth. He loved power and wealth, with the avarice of the niggard, with an unhealthy passion devoid of a trace of winged altruism.

Becoming harder of heart and more obstinate as he advanced in years, he experienced the intoxication of possession in the most gross and sensual manner, devoid of the tenderness of the lover, with only the grim voracity of instinct.

His infamous covetousness caused him to worm his way through the fallow grounds, as a reptile creeps through the poverty-stricken arable land, and along the gloomy, silent street of dingy gray huts, until he chanced upon an adobe house, a drove of pack animals, a flock of sheep, or a herd of cattle.

This morning the money lender began to buzz like a gigantic gnat roundabout the irrigable parcel of land where Olalla and Ramona were busy at work tapping the channel of the stream.

The two women stood up to their waists in the mud wielding their irrigating hoes, never venturing to stop a moment to take a breathing spell, with no relief from the heaviness of the labor, banking up and tracing out the desired path for the water.

"God help you!" said the tremulous voice of tío Cristóbal issuing from the deep cavity formed by his withered lips.

Ramona continued at her work, deigning no reply, but Olalla mumbled timidly:

"You are welcome."

A fit of coughing choked the old man, and his Gothic mane began to shake over his bended neck like a tuft of white moss fluttered by the wind in the top of a decayed tree.

The lips that were contracted in so frightful a grimace seemed about to give expression to something impatient, while the fixed and voracious eyes

scanned the faces of the toiling women with anxiety; no doubt tío Cristóbal was endeavoring to inform himself concerning urgent matters before ceasing to cough. Filled with alarm and dread, the young girl glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, but Ramona turned her back upon him with obstinate persistence, sinking ever deeper in the mud, painfully following the course of the water.

The year before, the women of the Salvadores household had not needed to irrigate their grain because there had been plentiful rains in the early spring; but now it seemed as if the source of the water had shrunk farther away from the grasp of the dauntless feminine arms, as one who failed to recognize them.

"This year it is farther away," the girl had said, drawing a heavy sigh, as she watched the longed-for water gliding down the slight declivity toward the grain with a gentle murmur.

At last tío Cristóbal was able to give utterance to the urgent question that had quivered in his eyes. He had stopped short on the edge of the rye field and was sweeping a covetous glance over the carpet of green stalks, leaning heavily on his cane.

The evening before he had heard that a young gallant had been accompanying, just as is the custom in the cities, the promised bride of Antonio Salvadores, the rich man whom he feared to see married to Mariflor, but whom he never for a moment considered generous enough to help the family through disinterested motives.

Should the marriage that had been planned years ago take place promptly, it might happen that when

the young couple made their home in Valdecruces they would free their grandmother's mortgaged patrimony. And then, farewell to the house, fields, oxen, and gardens which he had so long schemed in the dark to get into his possession!

But on the other hand, if the girl should marry that fine gentleman, he would take her away from this part of the country, and here, where with a single exception every household stood in need of help, there would be no other hand that might be extended toward the endangered property.

There was not the slightest chance that it would be protected by either Isidoro or Martín Salvadores, who, notwithstanding their capability in commercial matters, were also sinking like shipwrecked mariners beneath the curse hurled by tía Gertrudis upon the household of grandfather Juan.

Prevented from sleep by these troublesome thoughts, tío Cristóbal had allowed his better judgment to be overcome by impatience, and he wished to find out at any event what truth there was in the general supposition that the outsider was in love with the girl. He was about to ask pointedly: "So Martín's girl is going to get married to some one from the outside?" when tía Dolores herself suddenly appeared, tripping along the outer edge of the rye fields at a lively pace, an irrigating hoe over her shoulder.

The two cousins exchanged greetings with a light murmur of stupefaction. "What is that old dotard doing here?" tía Dolores asked herself.

She sprang promptly into the ditch with more agility than might have been expected, and gave

a sidelong glance at the man's impenetrable face which had become enlarged by the distance to a gigantic size, red and black, like that of a mask of tragedy, with the glaucous joyousness of the rye for a background.

"What brings him here?" the women asked one another suspiciously, standing in the channel of the ditch.

"To work, no doubt," replied tía Dolores with a tinge of sarcasm.

Ramona made a disdainful gesture, and Olalla sighed deeply, gasping for breath.

Now and then the young girl would straighten herself to measure with her eyes the surface over which the tiny streamlet spread its promising waters. It was not great, when one looked across it—scarcely twenty meters; but, to work over with the hoe until the higher ground was brought to a level with the slope down which the water must trickle, it was enormous; and the youthful form, new to that barbaric contest, trembled and bent double into a confused heap, sweating and burning beneath the implacable sun.

The rigid crust of the uncultivated ground resisted with stubborn rebellion the fierce battering of the hoe. A harassing palpitation, resembling in its bitterness the cry of a wild beast, agitated the breast of the toiler as she wielded her hoe, and the earth replied to her desperate blows with persistent echoes, spitting its corpselike dust into the woman's reddened face.

Olalla was startled on seeing how furiously her mother worked down the edge of the furrow, never

stopping for a moment's rest, never speaking a word, as if possessed by a brutal vertigo. She would lift her hoe and bring it down again with the impetus of a fury, with a violent quivering of her entire body; it seemed as if her bones creaked, and as if her eyes were about to spring out of her head; her face was so wet with sweat it seemed as if she were weeping a torrent of tears.

The old woman also stared in amazement at the tremendous power of blighted youth concealed in Ramona's blood and in her mind, despite the buffeting of winds and suns, despite sorrow and toil.

But tío Cristóbal was not in the least disturbed by that imposing struggle of heroic and living flesh with the hard, dead earth.

His impatience mounting to indignation over the untimely arrival of tía Dolores, over the hostile silence of the three women, and over the resounding echo of the digging, the miser was chafing under the double annoyance of delay and age, which trembles with impotency at every moment lost to its desires.

"So Martín's girl is going to get married to a man from the outside?" he shouted at last, after another fit of coughing and spitting.

The question glided over the half-opened trench and across the stubble like the twanging of a cracked bell; the exhausting labor was checked by surprise.

"What does he say?" murmured tía Dolores in amazement.

Olalla began to whisper a difficult explanation that confused the old woman still more, and Ramona cleaved the stubborn soil with redoubled strokes.

"Eh! Can't you answer?" demanded the old man.

Now the old grandmother gradually began to understand.

"Yes, yes; the gentleman from Villanoble who was traveling on the same train with us; he who is staying as a guest at the house of the curate and comes over every day to see us——"

"Yes, yes; but how about Cousin Antonio, and the marriage looked upon as a salvation for the family?"

"We shall see," insinuated Olalla, while her mother, silent and deaf, gave herself over with frenzy to her labor.

"The devil! Have you gone crazy? Can't you answer?" shouted tío Cristóbal in exasperation.

"We ought not to make him too angry," thought the girl, with her habitual calm and serenity, and she replied:

"Concerning what you ask—we know nothing."

"What do you mean by that; you know nothing? Then if it is not on account of the girl, what has that spruce young fellow come here for?"

"On account of Don Miguel."

"That's a lie!"

Olalla shrugged her shoulders with the same brusque movement peculiar to her mother; and the old man, suspecting that his investigation was destined to travel along a difficult path, resorted to patience; he restrained his fury with a snort, and let himself sink down in the shade of the tall stalks of rye, with the firm intention of remaining there

until he could find out something, until those stubborn women should speak, or should explode.

Then Ramona, still toiling like a beast of burden, flung him a sidelong glance; her head was bent, her breath came hard and fast while she fiercely attacked the stubborn soil.

The sun burned relentlessly, with the fury of midsummer, seeming to fall in sheaves of violent rays, and now it had climbed so high that the shadow of the growing rye disappeared from the path, leaving tío Cristóbal unprotected.

The hue of the broken earth, red as a wound in the pallid field, broadened over the soil beneath the all-powerful hoe.

Olalla followed along the path opened by her mother, and she also attacked the hostile clods with energy; but she needed to rest frequently, to stop to take a breath, and she was becoming visibly exhausted from the effort.

From time to time Ramona would slightly turn her face to murmur between her teeth:

"Hurry up, girl!"

Tía Dolores, notwithstanding her admiration, really wished to hate her daughter-in-law, to loathe her for being so strong and vigorous, so firm and dauntless; but violent passions could no longer dwell in the wearied breast of the aged woman; she could do nothing but passively regard those who surrounded her with a remnant of the strange and melancholy love which she had consecrated to the soil; in the petrifaction of all her sentiments, her life current was stemmed even to suffering, and it

must be a very cruel shock that could still cause her to shed tears, or stir her deeply.

Tío Cristóbal continued lying beside the growing rye, his fixed determination persisting in his mind, his gaze fastened upon the ditch, undisturbed by the heat of the sun scorching his back. Having become weary of waiting for some sign that should help him discover what he desired to know, he finally began to talk to himself and to mutter allusive phrases filled with double meanings and hints, trusting that the women, through their itching to reply, might catch at the bait of his conversation.

"A young girl should not be thwarted in her inclinations. Outsiders also make very good husbands!"

He hesitated a few moments in eager expectation, and as no reply came, between his spitting and coughing he spoke again:

"Even though Antonio is going to be made rich, he won't spend his money here; he likes Santa Coloma, the town where his mother lives, better than Valdecruces. The boy is all right, I don't say he isn't; but the young fellow from Madrid must be something very fine—and that business of writing that he has brings in a great deal of money."

The hoes continued to sink into the resisting clods, each with a ring peculiar to itself: one of them was fierce, the other vigorous, the third weak, in senile hands; the light concentrated over the plain like fire; a bird flew across, and still tío Cristóbal persisted:

"It would be a stupid thing to get rid of one for the other. With nothing but paper and ink the man

from Madrid will earn more in a month than Antonio with his store in a year. And besides, the people of the pen are liberal, and make a great show of generosity. The girl has had good luck. Is that she who is coming down the path there?"

Along the narrow path worn through the grain appeared a young girl walking slowly and heavily, with a basket hanging from her arm.

"It is noon already," she said as she drew near.

Setting down her light burden, she fanned herself with the loose points of her kerchief. In order to scan her evasive face, the old man dragged himself along through the burning dust, but she stubbornly turned aside, refusing to allow herself to be seen.

"Eh, girl! Are you the one that's going to marry the outsider?"

"I?" exclaimed Marinela, startled, suddenly turning.

"No, it is not you!"

Persistent, obsessed, Uncle Cristóbal raved about his sole idea, as if he had suddenly become demented.

Although the old man's face had been red before, it had turned the color of violet, and the glance of his gray eyes became so turbid, the words issuing from his sunken lips so hesitant, that Marinela imagined her relative intoxicated.

The two girls started toward the brook to fill once more the jar which had already been several times to the murmuring stream in quest of its refreshing water.

"It comes so hot!" lamented Olalla.

They filled the jar to the brim, each took a drink, and then they filled it again.

"It's like soup," said the thirsty girl who had been digging so violently. Then they began a whispered conversation, while they glanced cautiously toward the dark spot formed by the old man lying outstretched beside the irrigating ditch.

"Is he in his dotage, or has he been drinking?" asked Marinela.

"No, girl; he wants us to tell him who Mariflor is going to marry."

"And what have you told him?"

"What do we know?"

It was the first time that the two girls had spoken of the matter. The younger, still looked upon as a child, usually discovered the family secrets only with her eyes.

While the women were eating their lunch squatting in a row along the narrow path through the rye, scarcely sheltered from the full heat of the sun that fell perpendicularly upon the plain, Marinela went twice to fill her jar at the arroyo.

Tío Cristóbal had asked for water, and after giving it to him the girl spilled out the remaining liquid and made haste to wash the mouth of the jar where the old man put his ashen-hued lips.

He gave no sign of annoyance at this manifest repugnance, nor did he seem to notice the vexation and surprise which his persistent companionship caused the women. Fallen into a drowsy stupor, no doubt he had lost all idea of time, even forgetting to pelt them with his malicious questions.

Neither hunger nor example warned him that the dinner hour had come; nor did the torrid heat in which he lay baking arouse an impulse to seek the shelter of his house. When he saw the women make the sign of the cross it seemed to him that the familiar ringing of the bell came from very far away. And when, seeing him stupefied and half asleep, they told him that the sun would do him harm, he tried to raise himself up, but he fell back flat on the ground and lay motionless with his mouth hard against the dust.

The women glanced at one another in amazement, and as the old man gave a loud snore, Ramona said laconically:

"Let him sleep."

"In the sun?" asked Olalla with compassion.

Her mother, after hesitating for a time, replied by her accustomed shrug of the shoulders, and the girl, taking off her apron, arranged it solicitously over the Maragato's broad sombrero.

Not long after, sinking to her knees in the path, Marinela gathered up the bits of bread and the deep earthen pot with its remnant of broth, and Ramona, struck with sympathy at the feebleness of the stooping figure and the emaciated face of the girl, demanded suddenly:

"Why did you come in all this heat, you who are so lacking in appetite?"

"I will go back to the house to wash the dishes, to give the pig the swill, feed the chickens and doves, cut some wood, and drive the ducks to water," stammered the young girl with humility.

"That's a great deal," commented her mother with evident disdain.

At this juncture tío Cristóbal gave another snore; then suddenly he began to writhe in long vibrating convulsions, and while making an effort as if to rise, the finger nails of both hands dug deep into the ground.

The girls turned pale.

"It seems to me he is sick," said Olalla. She sank to her knees beside him and tried to lift his head; but it was stiff and rebellious.

Then Ramona came over, thrust her brawny arms beneath his rigid body, and with a quick jerk turned the man over; he appeared with his face almost black, moistened by a bloody foam, his eyelids fallen and his breathing difficult.

The women were terrified.

"Poor thing, he's dying!" exclaimed tía Dolores, overcome by terror and sympathy, while her daughter-in-law demanded with a blanched face:

"Water, water!"

Marinela dropped to her knees and extended the jar.

"There is some water here still." Her teeth chattered violently, while her mother sprinkled the old man's congested face.

The dying man opened his eyes and with a dull vacillating glance at Marinela, as when he had searched for the fiancée of the stranger before, said:

"No, it isn't you!"

His mouth set in its customary smile of impertinence, he stiffened and lay motionless, while his breathing became scarcely perceptible. Tía Dolores

quietly fanned him with her apron; the girls, silent and depressed, shaded him with their bodies; Ramona continued moistening his wrists and temples, and the silence fell upon the strange group with the sun, like a mantle of light.

"We must commend his soul," murmured Olalla, sinking to her knees.

"*Señor mío Jesucristo*," began her mother in a voice stifled by emotion, and the other women sorrowfully repeated the prayer to the end.

Tío Cristóbal had given no sign of understanding the tremendous visitation. His eyes grew dim and looked as if ready to spring from their sockets, while a rattle resembling a hiccough issued from his chest; with the final convulsion his head sprang from Ramona's hands, rebounding in the dust, and his finger nails again dug ferociously into the ground.

"Is he dead?" asked Olalla in terror.

Marinela screamed and shut her eyes tight.

"Yes, yes; we must call his people," replied her mother, tracing above the dead man the sign of the cross. Then seeing the girl so terrified, she added resolutely:

"You go on home with the basket, and on the way you can stop and give notice of what has happened."

"To whom?"

"To his family; they can send word to the authorities."

The girl started to obey in terrified silence. Her timid feet scarcely touched the path; her graceful figure disappeared between the tall stalks of rye; but perhaps a light grazing of her arm, or maybe a

gust of indolent breeze, swayed the green leaves with the gentle murmur of a whisper.

"Mother, mother!" sobbed the girl in terror. She turned and ran back, and remained standing on the edge of the rye field, not venturing to make her way out into the open where the dead man was lying asleep. Here she found her grandmother huddled on the border with an air of indecision, tempted to flight, but restrained by the labor and through charity.

"What is it, lass?" she asked in alarm.

"I am afraid; some one is following me; I heard a voice."

"You haven't even got grit enough to get out of the way!" Ramona complained in her harsh voice.

Marinela, overcome with terror, glanced through the living barrier of the rye stalks toward the irrigating ditch.

She saw that Olalla had disappeared, and that her mother, seated in the sun, impassive and stoic, was watching over the dead man. The corpse seemed more rigid, more disdainful, with its mouth open, its skin the parched color of the thistles; she stood there fascinated for a moment, and then suddenly started to run through the green mass along the narrow thread of the path; she stirred the foliage with her elbows and again the sound of the swaying leaves caused her indescribable uneasiness; all the cruel variations of panic vibrated in the tense nerves of the child, urging on her mad flight across the rye field.

When at last she reached the pueblo, gasping for breath, she did not know what to say to the people

in the house of tío Cristóbal. She entered the wretched dwelling which looked as if it might be the shelter of a family in utter want, and found Facunda sewing in the customary *cuartico*, the little room which on certain solemn occasions served the Maragatos as a dining room, placed of necessity between the kitchen and the yard, situated like the one which in the house of tía Dolores was called a parlor.

Facing the astonished gaze of her friend, Marinela, confused and silent, at last managed to say:

"I have come to tell you that your grandfather died up there by the Urdiales field."

"My grandfather? Is that so?"

Facunda, with more surprise than sorrow, had arisen to her feet.

"I have just come from there; I saw him myself."

"But what happened to him?"

"He was struck dead suddenly."

"*Virgen la Blanca!* And what was he doing there?"

"He was watching us open the ditch; we are irrigating our rye up on the heath."

"The field adjoining ours?"

"That is it!"

Facunda sat down again opposite Marinela with her sewing in her hand, bent almost double on a low stool, in an attitude of overwhelming fatigue.

"I've been waiting for him to come home to dinner."

"And haven't you eaten?"

"No."

They remained silent, looking into each other's

eyes in mute surprise, while the clock in its oaken case ticked on monotonously, seeming to fill the room with its sound.

Facunda picked up from the floor a little branch of wild thyme and slowly began to drive out the swarm of flies buzzing about the room.

"And the blessed dead," she said after a time, "did his heart jump out of his body?"

"His heart? It looked to me as if he had a pain in his eyes and in his mouth; foam was coming out between his lips, and his eyes were very wild."

"He left the house without eating any breakfast, with nothing but a glass of brandy."

"Well, they say that he went straight over to the rye field. There he kept asking them who my cousin was going to marry."

"Gracious!"

"He must have been in his dotage, he was so old!"

"And is she going to marry the outsider?"

A dark glow swept through the turquoise pupils of Marinela.

"I don't know," she stammered; and then after a moment she added:

"But I say that she is."

"He is polite and very good looking," mused Facunda in an ecstasy. "Are you hungry?" she asked suddenly, noticing an alarming change spread over the face of her friend, turning it as white as chalk.

"No," nodded the other.

"What is the matter with you? You look so different!"

Marinela winked her eyelids violently to frighten away the cloud of her tears, and at last with a painful effort managed to say:

"The dead man frightened me, you understand?"

"Oh, yes! He must have looked very ugly, dying without the last blessing of the Church."

"My mother recited the proper prayers for him."

"Are they still up there irrigating?"

"They'll have to work all day. The field lies as high as the ditch, and they have to do a great deal of hoeing."

"Who is helping you?"

"Nobody!"

As the dismal words revealed the helplessness of their poverty the alluring glitter of the wealth of tío Cristóbal flashed across the mind of the young girl.

"You're going to inherit lots of money!" she murmured, fascinated, but without envy or rancor.

Facunda's colorless eyes brightened, and her lips became set in a happy smile. All the shades of her emotion, roused by that announcement, glowed eloquently in the phrase:

"I must eat my dinner."

She rose again, with wearied movements; she was stout, strong, short; she had fleshy cheeks; her skin was bronzed by the sun; her expression was passive, and she possessed an insignificant youthful beauty in the contour of her figure.

Marinela allowed her curious glance to roam about, mechanically taking an inventory of the little room; suddenly it lighted upon a loose coat that had

belonged to tío Cristóbal hanging on the worm-eaten rack rigid and motionless, like a shroud.

"You will have to send word to the authorities," she warned the heiress in a solemn tone.

"Oh, must I?" cried Facunda, opening her mouth very wide.

"Of course!"

"Who said so?"

"My mother."

"But is that necessary? When grandmother died they didn't call the judge."

"Because she died in her bed. When Uncle Agustín sank down in the snow and was found dead, the Ayuntamiento came."

"And who can I send to Piedralbina?" murmured the troubled girl, as if called upon to accomplish an impossible exploit.

"Send Rosicler."

"He has the flock very far away, on the Urcebo hills."

"Then send your brother."

"He has gone to school."

Silence fell again, while they seemed to be overcome by worry over so serious a difficulty.

Marinela had risen to her feet without turning her eyes away from the old gray coat.

"Isn't there some farmer's boy who can do the errand for you?" she murmured softly, as if some one were sleeping.

In the same tone of mystery, Facunda replied:

"I will go myself after I have had a bite and have left word at my mother's house."

"That's it!"

Happy over the discovery of the unexpected solution, they glanced at each other in triumph, smiling, as if they had escaped from some tremendous danger.

After a long creaking of its springs the clock struck slowly, and Marinela, bidding her friend a laconic farewell, tiptoed out of the room.

"As you are passing by," said the mistress of the house with luminous inspiration, "you might stop in and tell Don Miguel."

"No, I can't do that; no!" refused the poor girl, trembling wildly.

"Why not, child?"

"I can't; no!" Grasping her basket the melancholy girl started on a mad run again, leaving her neighbor open-mouthed; but as she turned the corner and started across the plaza, at the very curb of the memorable fountain she was detained by a shadow, a voice, and a bow. It was the same stranger from whom she was again fleeing. He was coming down the street wearing a bright and pleasant smile; he extended his arms to restrain her in her mad flight, and with audacious mischief he whispered into her ear, like an echo of their first interview:

"Hail, Maragata!"

A cry and a sob answered the poet's devout prayer. He was compelled to sustain the girl by placing an arm around her waist, for she was dangerously inclining toward the basin where the water gushed forth telling of the eternal uncertainty of human affairs.

"Are you afraid of me?" he asked, deeply stirred,

using the "tu" in speaking to Marinela as if she were a child.

At this the whole cloud of her restrained tears burst forth.

"But you are always crying!" exclaimed Terán in anguish. "What is the matter? Why do you suffer?"

She allowed herself to be supported by his arms for an instant, maddened by the overwhelming dream that pervaded her heart, but suddenly she made an effort to free herself.

"Are you afraid I will hurt you? Are you sick?" he persisted with an air of tenderness and affection, not permitting her to escape from his arms.

"I can't; no, I can't!" repeated Marinela, still shaken by an impotent sob, as if she knew nothing else to say.

It seemed to Rogelio Terán that the disconsolate phrase had caused a profound shudder in the transparent heart of the water.

"What is the matter with you? Tell me!" insisted the poet.

She raised her lovely face with such an expression of gentleness and supplication that the gentleman loosened his arms and allowed the girl to depart.

Then she no longer made an effort to run, but walked on with lagging step, overcome by tears and sobbing, giving full rein to her grief with sudden and barbaric crudeness, with infantile lack of restraint.

Surprised and deeply moved, Terán saw her disappear down the scorching street. He had not come to Valdecruces to make women cry, and his rather

worldly experience detected through the girl's tears a warning of mysterious guilt. Mariflor had told him that her cousin was in poor health, and that ever since the night of the affair given by the strolling players she had been much weaker and more melancholy, more dreamy and sensitive. Twice they had come upon her writing the verses she had heard spoken by the Muse while the tears were coursing down her cheeks, and Olalla, who slept in her room, had told that the child did not close her eyes during the entire night, and that if she did happen to fall into a doze at daybreak, it was only to dream of the verses she had heard spoken by the wandering actress, and to repeat them in her sleep.

Also Terán had learned from Don Miguel, with many other details, that the girl felt a call to be a nun; but with the penetrating vision of the deep reader of souls, the poet that afternoon guessed a new reason for the complicated illness of the girl.

He gave himself up to studying the conflict, overcome by anxiety and regret, strolling through the streets of the silent pueblo, without noticing that the slender shadows from the walls had been gradually disappearing along the ruddy soil, and that the sun was burning like a volcano, its rays falling full upon the silent paths.

CHAPTER XIV

SOUL AND SOIL

SCARCELY two weeks had passed since that luminous morning when Rogelio Terán, the dreamer and adventurer, in the guise of a Don Quixote, had arrived in the region of the Maragatos —a period all too brief to investigate the land and the soul of this unknown and impenetrable country, this crude relic of remote ages, this poor and obscure survival of the turbulent centuries of iron.

The love affair between Mariflor and the poet ran on quietly, serenely, in the somewhat bored existence of the young man, while the character of the gentle girl revealed itself even more refined, more sensitive, and unselfish, than on the first never-to-be-forgotten meeting.

Certainly the impressions the artist received while making his investigations possessed a strong sense of originality. With much astonishment and compassion he came to know the arduous existence of these sturdy and taciturn women, which neither time nor neglect had succeeded in obliterating from the steppe, despite its cruelties. Habits and customs, features and dispositions, revealed themselves to the artist both diffident and friendly, as if the countenance of the village, so candid and so severe, might hold deep mysteries. Rough, uneven roads, ashen-

hued streets, wretched cabins, huts of adobe thatched with straw, dress, words, and types, seen at first glance, revealed the marks of their origin, but kept their history concealed. A veil of mist and shadow enveloped Valdecruces in the presence of the outsider, notwithstanding the splendid light of the sun.

In the romantic vagueness of his observations, the poet saw surge forth at every instant the living enigma of a pair of blue eyes, of a pair of silent lips, of a massive form, and a sluggish posture; the humble silhouette of a woman, timid, enigmatic, persistent; the Maragatan Sphinx, the vigorous archetype of the primitive mother, the emblem of this singular people, which had become petrified on the plain, an immovable island upon the waves of history!

This perpetual image, more timid and dull, continually repeated in the children: the round face, the high forehead, the concave profile, the gray or blue eyes, with a vague tendency to obliquity, contributed a primitive air of candor and timidity, a depressed appearance of affliction and servitude. The indirectness of the glance was a note of submission rather than of caution or diffidence; and the sluggishness of their movements and the slow expression of their thought in words, a sign of extremely rudimentary cultivation of intellect, the prolonged neglect of parched imaginations.

No masculine element whatsoever relieved the dull complexion of the village; the few old men who had taken refuge there had lost their virile energy during long periods of years spent in other lands; and in the ferocious exertions made by the

women to tame the paramo there was no display of the spirited ostentation with which females usually invest themselves when working in the place of men. All the impetus of those arms, the cultivators of the fields, was derived from maternal love, that exhaustless fount of renunciations and heroisms, that divine power which manifested itself in the silent, gloomy and morose feminine souls.

The stranger was led to conclusions of this nature after one of his intimate conversations with the curate.

"What is there," asked Rogelio, growing ever more curious, "in the hearts of these women to make them so diffident and long-suffering?"

"Nothing but the maternal instinct," responded Don Miguel, with a tinge of melancholy.

"And how about sexual love, that exuberant plant peculiar to youth that flourishes in every country throughout the world?"

"These women only know the obligations of the wife, that they should conceive."

"But sentiment, the exaltation of the spirit toward the man they choose, do they not experience that either?"

"They do not choose; a husband is given to them, and they respect him as long as he can support the family."

"There must be exceptions."

"There are none."

"Not throughout the entire region?"

"No; not unless some foreign element were to mix in the Maragatan life, which does not usually happen."

Terán thought he could perceive a veiled hint in the passive tone of the reply. The two friends were alone in Don Miguel's study, their conversation being stimulated by the smoke of their cigars, while tío Cristóbal lay dying in the field.

It seemed as if the curate was determined not to allude directly to the much-discussed love affair between the poet and Mariflor; and in this attitude the young man could detect a deep-seated hostility.

"And do you mean that in Valdecruces I would be that 'foreign element' you mention?" he asked suddenly.

"Who can say?" replied Don Miguel sorrowfully.

"Am I in the way here?"

"In my house, never! But," said the curate gently, "the facts in the situation are all against you; I doubt if you are destined to play the mission of a redeemer, as you imagine, in this land of the Maragatos."

"Not even that of saving at least one woman? Will she not have enough in having my heart, and in sharing my life?"

"Your life does not depend upon yourself. Your heart perhaps, does not, either."

"But——"

"Do not forget——"

"Yes, I will remember," interrupted the poet, disconcerted; "but that dismal memory need not always keep me from happiness."

"Happiness is not of this world."

"Oh, you always argue that way, from the ascetic point of view!"

"From the Maragatan point of view!" smiled Don Miguel significantly.

"And do you consider that Florinda was born for the purpose of making a sacrifice of herself?"

"Florinda was born to do a good work."

"As was every faithful Christian."

"But she has a special mission as a benefactress. Listen, Rogelio," added the curate, looking his friend directly in the eyes and speaking with emphasis, like one who has suddenly adopted a resolution, "your intentions are all very well. You came to Valdecruces following a woman, and laboring under a generous error; if you wish to 'save' her, as you say, do not prevent her footsteps from being directed toward the most sure and definite form of salvation."

"I am in the way; that is beyond a doubt!"

"In order that she should continue the course traced out for her, yes."

"Why did you not speak to me with this frankness from the first?"

"Because I was somewhat carried away by your idyl; because I had not realized that Mariflor's determination was so fixed."

"And now?"

"I see more clearly; I throw off the romantic influence of your confessions; I see things in their true light. We have no right, either you through egoism, nor I, through tender-heartedness, to impede the work of compassion which she proposes to carry out. I think, on the whole, that you ought to retire while Mariflor comes to an understanding with her cousin!"

"But has the time arrived?"

"Almost. At my request, Antonio is coming earlier than he had intended. He will be here this week; I am expecting him at any moment."

"And my going away in that case will not look like cowardice? You are mistaken if you think that I am held here through egoism; my keenest emotion is extreme sympathy."

"For one solitary and lovely woman?"

"I only wish I could redeem all the others!"

"And suppose Antonio could?"

The aspirant to Florinda's hand, irritated, almost offended, replied with irony:

"With the husband condescending to allow the wife to address him in the most formal manner, wait upon him, and venerate him as a god, and wear herself out working in the fields on the heath while he is reveling in the city! Is it in this manner that you want me to look for great deeds from a Maragato for the benefit of his family? Your protégé's relatives are rotting with poverty here, and he won't raise his hand to help them."

"He may be induced to do so through love."

"To the deuce with love and a convenient eight shillings, hombre! You priests fix up marriages with a little of routine and a little more of worldly interest." He restrained himself, fearing to offend his host, tempering the vehemence of his voice to add:

"You have told me that yourself."

"And it is true," replied Don Miguel without a trace of annoyance. "But perhaps among other farther advanced and happier people there are mar-

riages made for no more worthy motives; there may be different ingredients, more brilliant colors, more feigning, and more polish to gild the pill—but in the end, to sum it all up, marriages without love, nevertheless."

"Not always."

"Very often."

"At least these marriages do not carry with them the irritating injustice of causing a single victim!"

"Very frequently, yes: the woman!"

Terán rose from his chair, nervous, abashed by the memory of his mother's suffering, which suddenly weighed upon his mind like a tombstone. The curate also left his seat; he threw away the butt of his cigar, and in a persuasive and amiable voice began:

"See here, Rogelio, my friend; love, that exalted sentiment, ambitious, immortal, that fires and thrills us, that divine ladder that leads us from this earth to God, only by some strange miracle possesses a step upon which two creatures may embrace and ascend together."

"But—and that step——"

"It is not attained through romantic curiosity, nor through the compassion which you feel for Florinda Salvadores. If you cannot climb the divine ladder in triumph with her leave her in Valdecruces to carry out her mission of being a comforter to others."

"And to be a martyr?"

"Doing good mitigates one's own sorrow, cures it, recompenses it. He who most loves immolates himself with more fervor."

"That is to say that you definitely deprive me of all hope."

"No, I am only giving you my advice. Listen! A love like this of which I am speaking, and one like that you mentioned some time ago—impulses, desires, and sympathies more or less tenuous—usually does not produce flowers in this world; I have pointed that out to you before; but of the sacred flame, the divine spirit, we have a close resemblance in the self-sacrificing love of mothers. Florinda would not be bereft of all joy; as a result of this love she could enjoy a truer form of happiness than other women, with more reason and more grace."

"With more of sorrow, too!"

"Not if she becomes reconciled to the idea and makes up her mind to it, no indeed! All the happiness of this world, in my opinion, consists merely in that; in conforming to circumstances."

A pause and a sigh interrupted the discourse of Don Miguel while the artist murmured:

"There is a great deal of truth in what you say."

The curate continued, explaining in gentle and persuasive tones:

"In these marriages where, as you truly say, custom and convenience go hand in hand, there is nevertheless a most exemplary background of respect and fidelity. It is true that the Maragatan woman must eat in the kitchen, wait on her husband at table, address him only in a formal manner, and that she fears him, and never really comes to know him; that she works in the fields like a hired hand, and she sees him take his leave with no annoyance or regret; and yet in this which she does, and to

which he consents, there is no deliberate humiliation on one side or despotism on the other, but there is on the part of both of them an old-time sincerity, a rude conformity. Here the soul is primitive and simple, the customs have become fixed with the life; this is the result of the isolation, of the necessity, of the poverty; we are still living in medieval times."

"But the Maragatan men all emigrate; why don't they take an example from more advanced countries?"

"They are impelled to leave here not so much by ambition as poverty. Those who have managed to overcome their ignorance have succeeded in entering into the current of civilization, and have become an honor to their country. In America we have lawyers, captains of industry, founders of towns, who have made their regional costume and their family virtues prevail, notwithstanding contrary foreign influences. You know that those upon whom Fortune smiles are very few; and through lack of intelligence, the majority of our emigrants go on suffering in a most precarious existence, working in the most ordinary positions. They consider themselves a race apart in the world, and they are so devoted to their moral laws that they do not adopt those of other countries, neither the good nor the bad. They are excellent fathers, industrious citizens, economical, faithful, and pacific. If it is not their habit to beam upon their wives, or to take pity upon them, neither do they deceive nor corrupt them: they treat them neither well nor ill, because they scarcely have anything whatever to do with them. They take them in order to raise a family; they sustain them accord-

ing to their positions; and the asperity of these harsh natures is discharged blindly, with all the weight of their brusqueness, upon the passive condition of the women; and yet, without malice or perfidy; simply with the inevitable might of the stronger."

"Do you consider it just?"

"I consider it human."

"And you excuse it?"

"No, I regret it. Every sealed fount of tenderness arouses my sorrow and my sympathy."

A moist film overspread the eyes of the priest, perhaps at the evocation of a painful memory, and Rogelio asked, glancing at him with intense curiosity:

"Is your discourse intended to convince me that Mariflor needs one of these husbands—one of these survivals of the Middle Ages? You haven't proved it to me yet."

"I am not trying to prove anything to you; I want you to understand as far as possible the situation of Florinda if she were married to a man who, even under the worst conditions, would not prevent her from living in ease and helping her family; I want you to realize that it might happen that the girl could influence the heart of her cousin to ameliorate the misfortunes of her grandmother."

"By means of the marriage?"

"Or without the marriage; we do not know what may happen; and I must tell you also that, for my part, as counsellor and mediator of these poor people, it is not a question of Florinda only, but of two unfortunate mothers, of two sick and unhappy

sons in a foreign country, of five other creatures whose future seems to be bound up in the fate of this young girl."

"But I would be a coward if I were to overlook her chances of happiness."

"Happiness, nonsense! If Mariflor had never known you she would consider herself fortunate in finding a rich and faithful husband."

"One does not live by bread alone. She would be very unhappy in the vulgarity and desolation of such an existence."

It seemed as if the priest became absorbed again in memories of the past, when he murmured with a solemn accent:

"A life in which one is doing good is neither vulgar nor lonely; sacrifice is a work of high order which receives very intimate recompenses."

"But are you a Maragatan positivist or a raving mystic?"

"I am a poor curate of souls who wishes to do his duty. Mine is a mission of peace and love, and in the harsh land where I labor I may not dream of fruit except at cost of sorrows; when it is impossible to prevent them, I do my utmost to lessen them."

"Not in the case of Florinda."

"If she accepts a cross, and I teach her to bear it, will I not have sweetened her path?"

"We all have a right to seek a path where there are no crosses."

"No living soul will find it."

"But while one is seeking and hoping——"

"He is wasting his time."

"He is living with his dreams."

"Before seeing them dissipated it is better to give them an upward trend."

"Oh, yes; oh, yes; always the same idea: the other life! God commands us also to enjoy this one."

Allowing himself to sink back again into remote recollections, the curate exclaimed:

" 'Woman is a mysterious being born to love and to suffer!' "

"What! Do you say that?" the artist asked with impatience.

"They are the words of a Christian philosopher. I have seen them fulfilled on many occasions."

He threw an emphasis of sorrowful bitterness into the positive assertion. Terán, lost in thoughts, gloomy, asked almost angrily:

"To sum it all up, then, what is it you ask of me?"

"Not a great deal. That you do not reveal this confidence to Florinda; that you endeavor not to disturb her plans; that you wait with all prudence without impairing the girl's courage, or compromising her."

"And you think I ought to go away?"

Don Miguel hesitated.

"My house is yours always," he said cordially, "but it would cause a bad effect on Antonio for him to think himself supplanted before negotiating with his cousin."

"No one but you and Olalla know anything about our relations."

"And all Valdecruces! I must tell you, because tío Cristóbal wished to make the inevitable rumor of this love affair patent to every one; I learned

to-day through my niece that, by making use of Rosicler, other boys, and some young girls, the old man was planning to 'lay the track' for you this very night."

"And what is that?"

"A custom of the country. When the girls get wind of a matrimonial probability they go out at night on the quiet to lay a path of straw, clear and unmistakable, from the house of the lover to that of the girl, with ramifications leading off to other houses, indicating invitations to the wedding. Before the door of the supposed bride they weave a sort of mattress of branches and straw."

"The nuptial couch," smiled the artist, charmed with the idea.

"Yes, it is at once a joke, and incredible, considering the extreme modesty of these women."

"For my part I don't know whether the chastity of the women here, without the slightest struggle or danger, everlastingly asleep, has much merit in the eyes of God."

"You cannot deny that it is a virtue."

"Or perhaps it is a sign of barbaric coldness."

"Who knows but that, in polishing us, civilization is making us more sensitive, is making us more or less susceptible to evil?"

"It makes us conscious of our acts, my dear man, which is the same thing as to make us responsible. What, are you leaning toward retrogression?"

"I am leaning toward being the curate of Valdecruces for the present."

"Very well. And how about that track you mentioned?"

"It is an official compromise of marriage if the girl does not protest. If she rejects the aspirant to her hand, or the rumors of the affair are untrue, she conducts the trail toward a lake, pond, or irrigating ditch during the next night."

"That is curious."

"It makes an excuse for a nocturnal sally, but one full of secrecy and moderation, of course. I have taken my precautions to prevent your being compromised by the jest, although if he persists in the notion——"

"I will leave at once," said Terán, after a moment of reflection. "I will mention to Mariflor the possibility that an urgent letter might compel me to go away—but my going will not be a retreat, merely a truce; only on that condition will I give you the pleasure."

"Nor do I ask anything more of you. Merely a truce; that will give you time also to think things over and to resolve so important a matter in all deliberation."

"Then, day after to-morrow, if you think best."

"Very well. God help you!"

Much more content than would have seemed possible during the course of the conversation, the two friends went downstairs to breakfast.

An hour later, giving no heed to the sun, Rogelio strolled down the street on which Florinda lived, having been told by her that she would be alone, and that they would have an opportunity for a talk.

The girl's graceful head did not long delay in making its appearance above the crude fence, among

the eglantine and dog-roses. She appeared with one of those sweet smiles that seem to originate in the eyes and then bloom upon the lips, and she received her lover's fervent creed with impassioned tenderness. With extreme delicacy he allowed the fear of a sudden departure to slip into the conversation: his affairs seemed to be threatening to call him back to Madrid at any moment.

The wave of emotion flashing over the face of the girl revealed her to be so depressed, so filled with sorrow, and so harassed by this life, standing there mute and tremulous between the thorny branches growing along the fence, that the young man was deeply touched, and he made a thousand spontaneous vows of constancy and fidelity.

"I will return soon," he said; "whenever you assure me that you are ready to come away with me."

He looked at her, rejoicing in the realization of being so profoundly loved, but with his heart filled with grief at seeing her so heavily tried and afflicted, while already the impression produced by the struggle she was making to bear up under the painful burden that as yet had scarcely begun to fall upon her slender shoulders was plainly evident. With the prolongation of this situation, this cruel servitude, what would become of her? Was she destined to be redeemed by the gold of her cousin, or by the love of the poet?

As if the girl could divine that this doubt filled the thought of her beloved she murmured with furtive hope:

"Yes, you will return soon!"

She managed even to smile; even to give expres-

sion to happy phrases, and returned promises of arduous passion, firmly on guard against the first assault of an inward sense of apprehension that beclouded the dark velvet of her pupils, as if the wan smile on her lips would never return to her eyes where it had originated.

The lovers agreed to meet again in the rye patch late in the afternoon. Florinda thought to go out at sunset, when the water would be running along the furrows across the field on the heath, when the work of irrigation, which for so long had held her sleepless with worry, would at last be accomplished.

Terán compliantly took his leave, and he walked away free of care, with a lightness of spirit strange and indefinable at that moment. He felt optimistic, filled with agreeable assurance which had scarcely taken root in his conscience, swayed by vague hopes no less grateful because of their indecision and lack of restraint. He went away enveloped perhaps in a glow of love, in the divine mantle that with infinite sweetness covers him who receives it, and destroys the hands that weave it.

In this mood he met Marinela, who was fleeing from him, and who fell into his arms overcome by tears. When he released her from his arms, touched to the heart by compassion, he suddenly lost the serene sense of felicity that enveloped him and awoke to his intimate cares, regretful at having touched upon so many sorrows, lost in confusion, his mind filled with foreboding, as if the sick girl with her sobbing had infected him with an attack of restlessness and uneasiness.

He wandered about Valdecruces for hours, irreso-

lute and feverish, harassed by the oppressive sensation of suddenly finding himself a captive. The anguish of a prison martyrized him as he made his way along each dingy street that lay burning in the heat. At last weariness and thirst led him to the silent entrance of a tavern above which hung a motionless strip of cloth of doubtful color, denoting, according to the custom of the country, traffic in wine.

The stranger asked for a chair and a glass, not without being compelled to call loudly several times, until at last an old man made his appearance. Served with extreme parsimony, stared at in amazement by an old woman who had come following behind the old man, he learned there that tío Cristóbal had fallen dead of a sudden attack beside the rye field.

"While he was at work?" he asked with sympathy.

"Nonsense! No, sir; he was watching some women who were out irrigating."

"The Salvadores women?"

"Exactly; Don Miguel has already been over there with the holy oil, but he died without any preparation whatever; they are waiting now for the officials to come and lift him up."

The poet rested for a few moments, paid with generosity for the glass of watered wine, and began to search for a path leading to the open, directing his steps toward the east. It was almost the hour of his tryst with Mariflor, and the tragic event of the afternoon seemed propitiously to insure that the

presence of the young gallant in the rye field would not arouse distrust.

When he had gained the open country the sky appeared somewhat cloudy; delicate gray tufts encircled the west, where the sun, as if fatally wounded by the night, had begun to sink to its decline, implacable and red above the thirsty plain.

When Rogelio had made his way through the narrow path across the grain and looked out upon the waste land where the channel led toward the arroyo, his eyes beheld a spectacle that astonished and thrilled him with profound emotion.

There where the bold opening in the uncultivated ground rose in a gentle acclivity toward the bank of the brooklet, loomed Olalla and Ramona against the livid resplendence of the sunset glow. The hoarse stroke of their hoes resounded austere and terrible as if from the excavation of a grave; the two women advanced and made a thrust, solemn and mysterious in the fading light, as if they were opening a sacred tomb for the dying planet; they made haste so as to finish their work before the plain should become enwrapped in the gray cerements of night.

The corpse of tío Cristóbal lay sleeping on the stubble ground, half covered by a merciful shelter of branches of flowering broom; beside it knelt tía Dolores praying or weeping and watching in delirious expectation; at the other end of the horizon a fringe of pallid clouds was draped like a funeral hanging along the edge of the sky.

The inevitable siesta hour had passed unobserved that day by the toilers in the Urdiales rye field.

Olalla had taken advantage of the customary cessation from labor to satisfy the sudden impulse of her heart; and advancing intrepidly through the scorching field to the parched bank of the arroyo, she cut as great a bundle of broom grass as she could hold in the broadly extended circle of her vigorous and protecting arms. With patient care she chose with solicitude, seeking in the furze thicket the least gloomy of the blossoms; she wished to protect the dead man from the flies and from the rays of the sun, and to do him the honors of the field with a touch of mitigation.

As she piled the pale genista above the corpse the other women, sitting huddled on the border of the planted ground, recited the rosary. Ramona counted off the Ave Marias on her fingers, murmuring in distorted Latin at the end of every decade, by way of a response: "*Requiescanquinpace.*" Then she recited the Litany of the Virgin, in the same barbarous Latin, and finally began to reel off a series of paternosters for the obligations of the dead man.

Tranquil, hieratic, with the placid assistance of the aged grandmother, the women exhausted the repertory of appropriate prayers when Olalla came and placed herself between the two, murmuring:

"What will Tirso, the heir, do to us?"

"Take over everything; put us out of the house; he inherits his father's avarice along with his property," replied her mother. Her swarthy face seemed to have grown more dark, and her accent, always brusque, to have become more harsh.

The three women were silent for an instant, overwhelmed by the severity of this declaration.

Tirso Paz had a reputation for being avaricious; he came into his father's wealth after a long life of deprivations, discouraged over the unjust fate of the poor son who has a rich father; surely he would receive his inheritance greedily, impatient to possess, without pity, what he, in his poverty, never found, without merciful truces, which his own father had taught him to deny.

This thought seemed to tremble, ill-omened, prophetic of evil, along the border of the planted field, in the burning, luminous silence, but all their anxiety was suddenly stifled by the imperious warning of Ramona, who, consulting the sun, announced gravely:

"The rest period is over."

She strode toward the ditch with her hoe over her shoulder; the grandmother and the girl imitated her, and as they passed beside the dead man the three reverently made the sign of the cross. Ramona began digging again with savage fury, as if the earth were violently hated, as if into each stroke from her relentless arms she threw the impetus of odium.

Every now and again the dauntless woman turned toward her daughter to shout savagely:

"Hurry up, girl!"

And the poor tyro, breathless, soaked with perspiration, followed the footsteps of her mother, while the grandmother was left far behind, like a useless and abandoned tool, mechanically breaking up the overturned clods, scarcely knowing what she was doing.

Standing in the furrows, digging in the dust, pondering upon her grief, tía Dolores was suddenly

overcome by a paralysis of all her forces. For the first time in her life she felt herself impotent in the field. Mortification at her incapacity filled the unfortunate creature enslaved to the soil by a strong and gloomy love, and the more irremediable her calamity the more poignantly rose in her breast an obscure rancor toward the other vigorous young woman who, hurling herself into the work like a fury, could command haughtily:

"Hurry up, girl!"

The wife, inflexible toward the idea of receiving her sick and impoverished husband, could still take pride as a mother, able to give shelter to an unfortunate son; but the aged woman, the broken toiler of the field, no longer had a right even to be a mother.

Thus thought tía Dolores confusedly, recalling, more greatly to her sorrow, the dangerous situation of her mortgages in the power of Tirso Paz, who was more to be dreaded than tío Cristóbal himself. Bereft of fields, of house, and of strength to work, she could no longer receive Isidoro, nor be of use to him in any way, nor even give him shelter; everything was over for her in this world!

The broken woman made an effort to summon back the courage that had been hers for laboring in the beloved soil until so short a time ago. She longed to feel again the strong passion she had once felt, and to dominate it as in her better days. She bent valorously over the bottom of the ditch, hoe in hand, as if with wild anguish making ready to disinter her buried strength, and, at the impulse of her

impossible desire, she fell on her knees until her forehead struck the dust.

The bitter creaking of her bones did not resound as loudly as the blows of the digging, and the old woman pulled herself up without causing alarm, daunted and sorrowful as never before, just as an urgent voice, ever growing more distant, commanded:

"Hurry up, girl!"

Tía Dolores was being left alone with the dead man; she glanced at him, stupefied with terror. Above him the genista lay withering, forming a long yellow hulk lying on the stubble, on the edge of the worked ground.

The woman sank down, her mind dazed, and the certainty of her impotence converted into tears and prayers.

Several times Olalla, seeing her little old grandmother in such a strange attitude, came over and asked her if she were not affected by the sun. She shook her head with a negative gesture and the girl mercifully ran over to the streamlet to bring water with which to moisten her mute lips, asking:

"Why don't you get into the shade? Why don't you sit there and take a rest?"

The grandmother stammered in vague accents:

"Hurry up, hurry up!" And she was left alone again with the dead, far from the women who were hoeing.

People had begun to make their appearance through the paths across the rye field; a group of youngsters who had run away from school, a few

compassionate old women, the priest, the sacristan, and the gravedigger.

Don Miguel looked casually at the corpse, spoke to the witnesses of the sudden death and then went away.

The laboring women in the adjoining fields, without interrupting the work of their neighbors, repeated with unction: *"Biendichoso!"*

The gravedigger started off to prepare the grave, with serene delectation, and Uncle Rosendín, the sacristan, respectfully returned to the church the holy oils which had accompanied Don Miguel.

The youngsters also paraded about, curious to see the justice, impatient to escort him, and to scatter the tragic news through the streets of the town.

"It will be impossible for them to get here from Piedralbina before night," the priest had said. "Facunda walks so slowly they won't get word before six o'clock."

The arrival of the authorities was awaited with keen anticipation.

Meanwhile the channel was being brought near the bank of the arroyo, and Ramona ordered her daughter to make a few judicious cuts in the soil of the rye field, to prepare it for the running of the water.

Dragging herself along between the ridges, with a small hatchet the girl opened a few light furrows at the upper end of the field; then she suddenly rose to her feet, burning in the heat concentrated in the grain, congested by her position and by the effort, to dash up to the head of the opening, obedient to the hypnotism of the relentless cry:

"Hurry up, girl!"

A few more strokes, a wild effort to catch their breath, the supreme tension of their muscles, and the final desperate tremor of their nerves, and the two women saw the water running obedient and humble, converting the hard channel into a soft siphon of beneficent promises.

The stream trembled and sang; the sun set; the grain drank; and the heroines of the digging, feverish and exhausted, rested beside the dead man.

When Terán appeared upon the austere stage, another shadow came following behind him. Florinda also threaded her way through the stubble along the border of the path. The two approached the singular group, stared at it in silence, and listened to the old grandmother, who with furtive emotion that seemed to have escaped from a delirium, lamented:

"Now I won't be able to receive Isidoro!"

Ramona turned in the direction of the deep-toned voice, and, realizing the bitterness of the incapacitated mother, suddenly thought of her own old age, saw an example of it in the gloomy inutility of the old woman, and began to sob violently, her perspiring face livid, her body trembling, and emitting an acrid odor of rusticity.

Florinda and her lover fell back, terrified, without guessing the reason of their sudden despair; perhaps they thought to flee from that rude drama, so incomprehensible to them, when an irresistible attraction drew them toward the corpse of tío Cristóbal.

Lying there in the sleeping twilight glow, under

the branches of the flowering broom that had aroused general curiosity, nothing of the old man could be seen except the clawlike hands with the nails swollen by the earth he had scratched up in the stubble during his last struggle.

CHAPTER XV

THE MESSAGE OF THE DOVES

TO-DAY the poet was to take his leave; after luncheon he was to come over to the garden wall to say good-by to his beloved.

"He will come back soon!" This phrase had been repeated in her mind over and over again. Meditating upon it with acute anguish, Mariflor, standing in the ditch near her street, converted into a washerwoman, was helping Olalla to rinse the clothes.

The sky looked somewhat stormy, and the temperature seemed mild, with a slight coolness from humidity.

The two girls worked in silence, Mariflor revealing herself much more skilled than her inexperience might have promised. Sorrow beclouded her mind; her delicate hands moved about in the soapy water like an insensate machine.

Olalla glanced at the clouds, thinking of the futility of the irrigation, and she sighed as she thought of the approaching harvest: there would be no money for paying wages to the harvesters either, nor would there be a breathing space in which to rest, nor a truce from the barbaric labor, which was beyond the efforts of the poor women.

An itinerant vendor passed with his mules laden with trinkets and he shouted monotonously:

"*Tienda!—Tienda!*"

"He sells thread, needles, trimmings, and other things," said Olalla to her cousin with an air of pride.

"But does he sell anything, really?"

"Naturally!"

"But as there is no one here to buy——"

"Why not? They exchange eggs, lard, doves, grain, for his goods; he takes in a great deal."

The echo of the cry resounded throughout the town, breaking the monotonous silence:

"*Tienda!—Tienda!*"

Down at the end of the street, across the little square where gurgled the fountain, rode a Maragato mounted on a tall horse, with his baggage, and accompanied by an attendant on foot.

"Tirso Paz?" questioned Olalla with an air of anxiety.

"He looks young. Tirso is old, isn't he?"

"They say he is; I don't know him."

They remained silent, disturbed, each trying to conceal her intimate preoccupation; and by the time the morning was half over they had finished their task.

There was no one in the little parlor through which the two girls made their way toward the hall, as they returned to the house through the corral.

Marinela was ill and was lying down in her room; and when Florinda started to open her door, she stumbled against a bundle on the floor, and saw the

clothing of a man on the bed, a pair of trousers and a jacket covered with dust.

"Your cousin has come suddenly, without sending word in advance," said Ramona behind the girl, "and as this is the room we have to give to guests——"

Florinda seemed turned to stone in the presence of the Maragatan masculine garb, and Olalla, who also peeped into the little room, exclaimed in astonishment:

"Antonio has come! That was the traveler we saw crossing the square." And she turned as pale as a dead woman.

"Yes; he came in by the other street," corroborated her mother with a voice less harsh than usual.

"And where is he?" Florinda asked at last with an air of bewilderment.

"As soon as he had changed his clothes he went over to Don Miguel's house; he said that he had been sent for on affairs connected with the marriage."

"I will go over there at once, then!"

"You?"

"Certainly!"

"I never heard of such a thing; the lass treating with her promised husband about the marriage!"

"My cousin is not my promised husband; but even if he were there would be all the more need for me to speak to him immediately."

The accent of the girl was so firm, and her determination so fixed, that Ramona, though compelled to yield, wished to impose her authority, and commanded:

"Olalla will go with you."

"Yes, let her come."

Upon turning toward her cousin Mariflor was amazed to find her cheeks colorless, while she seemed to be absorbed and disconcerted.

"Shall we go?" she asked.

"But as we are, without fixing ourselves up a bit?"

"All right, if you don't take too long."

"I'll be ready in a jiffy."

The blond Maragatan girl promptly disappeared, followed by her mother, while Florinda, without entering her room, waited impatiently, suffering agonies from contradictory emotions. What would she succeed in obtaining from Antonio? What was he like, and what would he think of her? No doubt her fate would be decided this dark, gloomy day that was sweeping so silently, so colorlessly, over Valdecruces.

It seemed to Mariflor that her cousin was taking a great deal of time; it surprised her to think that she was dressing herself as if for a fiesta, merely because Antonio had come; and with an inevitable gesture of coquetry she smoothed her hair with her hands, shook her skirt, and arranged the plaits of her bodice. Perhaps she would have gone into her room to have given more attention to her toilet if an instinctive repulsion had not so overcome her that she could give no heed to the lavish array in which Olalla returned, nor to her manner, which was now composed and obsequious.

The two cousins did not exchange a single phrase until they had reached the house of the priest; but after they had knocked at Don Miguel's door Olalla

anxiously detained Florinda and stammered with difficulty:

"What are you going to tell him?"

"I'm going to ask him to save us."

"And—that you don't care for him?"

"Not for a husband; yes."

"Think it over well! If you poison his mind, he will leave us in the same tribulation as he found us."

"I can do no more!"

This time it was Mariflor who turned pale, and who trembled, feeling a bitter taste in her mouth and a veil of perturbation in her eyes.

"Is Antonio upstairs?" she asked Ascensión, who received them.

"He is."

"And—Rogelio?"

"I have not seen him go out."

"But was he with Don Miguel?"

"He was."

"Then——"

"I hear only two persons talking; Don Rogelio comes in and goes out quite frequently."

When Florinda knocked at the door of the library and asked "May we come in?" a momentary silence of expectation preceded the permission, and the new call was received with the utmost amazement.

It had been but little more than a quarter of an hour since Ascensión had requested audience for Antonio Salvadores.

"He is downstairs, inquiring for you," the girl had announced to her uncle.

The priest, without hesitation, had replied:

"Have him come up."

At the same time Rogelio had said hastily:

"I must be going."

But with a sudden inspiration his friend had advised him:

"Step into my alcove."

"For what? To listen?"

"In order to inform yourself."

"As they do in comedies?"

"And as they do in real life."

"No; I don't like the idea."

"If you have scruples, there is a partition; but perhaps what you hear may interest you."

And as the heavy shoes of the stranger were already resounding in the passageway, Don Miguel closed the glass door in front of the artist, and left him there in the dim light, taken by surprise, held through curiosity, in spite of himself.

First he heard the exchange of the customary greetings: a vigorous youthful voice alternated with that of Don Miguel. According to the first voice the traveler had found no one at home in his grandmother's house except tía Ramona, and without stopping to take a moment's rest he had come, all impatient for the meeting with the priest. Don Miguel, filled with impatience also, made no circumlocutions before arriving at the main object of the conversation; and the first news which the Maragato heard was that his cousin no longer possessed a dowry.

"Then I retract my offer of marriage," said the firm voice, not without a trace of annoyance.

The poet writhed in indignation behind the glass door: the thin tulle curtains permitted him to see

dimly the little library which was better lighted than the alcove, and he could distinguish the man who until that moment had been his rival.

"Your grandmother, as well as her sons, is in a state of ruin," said Don Miguel, with his courteous words concealing the anger of his accent. "She had the whole hacienda mortgaged and she is leading a pitiable existence; your cousins are obliged to go out into the fields and work like the poorest people in the region. You are rich; and charity, as well as your duty, demands that you do not forsake them."

Florinda's hesitant knock cut short on the lips of her cousin a violent reproach.

"Duty!" he was about to exclaim. "And have you brought me over here in order to tell me that?"

The two girls entered, silent and shrinking. Olalla in a very circumspect attitude, lowered her eyes, playing with the tiny fringe bordering her elegant kerchief; Mariflor swept a feverish flash from her dark pupils about the room, and seeing only the Maragato and the priest, she recovered something of her serenity.

"This must be the daughter of my Uncle Martín," stammered Antonio after an embarrassing greeting.

"Yes," said the priest.

"May you live many years——"

The young man remained speechless, twirling his sombrero between his fat, coarse fingers.

Mariflor had stopped near her cousin, looking him over in mute inspection, filled with hope and with uneasiness.

He was stocky, strong, glossy-faced; his arms

were short, his eyes candid, his bearing timid. He wore a striking costume, consisting of smocked shirt, red-flowered waistcoat with silver buttons, reddish brown breeches, a coat with skirts, fastened tight about his waist with a silken cord, cloth leggings with garters containing the woven device *Viva mi dueño*, and a fanciful belt where glittered another showy motto of amorous trend; beneath his leggings a pair of enormous shoes with straps took firm possession of the floor.

In order to shorten the annoying preliminaries of the conference, Don Miguel, frowning, annoyed, hastened to say to the girl:

"Antonio has learned the situation of all of you; and yours in particular decided him, it seems, not to insist upon his proposal of marriage."

With the singular relief which these words brought the girl a lively impression of repugnance promptly became mixed. What could she ask of the niggardly heart of that man? How would it be possible to move him, or with what manner of dignity could she attempt it at that instant?

Her stupor and shame, however, could not compel her to lower her eyes; she fixed them upon her cousin with a silent and penetrating stare, until finally he began to perspire and squirm. No one had ever before looked at him like that.

Seeing his confusion and stupidity, she put aside an easy revenge, and said, with all the sweetness of her voice and all the generosity of her spirit:

"We have not asked you to come here to discuss marriages, but to beg you to help grandmother until my father can succeed in doing so. It is now three

months since I came here, without even suspecting the state things are in, and I have been trying with the help of Don Miguel, our protector, to save the property, which is being lost through ignorance and timidity. The poor old woman did not dare to look to you for help, you who are rich and generous."

Florinda underscored this prudent discourse with a light, ironic smile, a sweet expression with which she seemed to overlook her relative's harsh disdain.

"You do not reply?" she added in amazement at the silence of the Maragato.

As he was still speechless, perspiring, undoing the tassels of his hat, the young girl approached and put her two hands gently on his shoulders with familiar simplicity.

"Come, cousin! You are an educated man, a gentleman, and you cannot consent to allowing grandmother to be thrown out into the street at her age, after all she has been through! Haven't you seen her? She has become somewhat childish with the years of anxiety, and all her sorrows. If you don't give her your protection she will be left without land and without oxen, without a garden and without a house. She is in debt to Tirso Paz for a mere handful of money—and you have so much!"

"What a resourceful girl!" thought the priest.

Olalla began to weep; her body shook with racking sobs, and it seemed as if some one were stirring about in the alcove.

Antonio sat motionless, as if petrified beneath the slender fingers of Mariflor, and did not utter a word. Never before had so beautiful a face been close to his; never had so soft and angelic a voice

sounded in his merchant's ear; nor did the youth imagine that creatures so eloquent of speech, so attractive and so great of heart, existed in all the world.

"You do not answer?" she insisted, catching him by the shoulders and shaking him gently.

She could not manage to move him; her generous effort seemed to her futile, and her graceful arms fell wearily upon her apron in an attitude of despair.

As if the youth became master of his will only at that moment, he raised his blue eyes in ecstatic rapture toward those which were fastened upon him.

He found them impenetrable, submerged in gloomy darkness, and he lowered his own again with great respect. At the same time Mariflor read such meaning in his sudden glance that she hastily stepped back until she stumbled against a chair.

"Well, then, the priest and I will talk matters over," said Antonio suddenly, with an air of resolution.

Olalla ceased her weeping and Florinda did not know what to say; she felt her eloquence congealed, and she would not have dared to extend her persuasive and deprecating arms again.

No one had sat down. Don Miguel, perplexed, irresolute, was rolling a cigarette for Antonio, striding about between the table and the balcony, not venturing a word through fear of saying something he might regret. He was beginning to realize that all would have been lost if Florinda had not come in with the dominion of her will and the angelical appearance of her person. But had not the influence of the girl already gone too far?

The curate feared so, seeing her so disturbed and listening to the friendly reasoning of her cousin.

An old clock on the wall struck twelve and at the same time the air vibrated with the twanging of the bell in the church tower.

Don Miguel began to recite the prayers; a pious murmur floated throughout the room: it seemed as if invisible wings were fluttering breezes of peace upon the inclined heads. When they were raised again, hallowed by the sign of the cross, the kindly eyes of the priest rested with commiseration upon Mariflor. She attempted a disconcerted smile which might have been one of encouragement or one of despair, and then Don Miguel said:

"Very well; Antonio and I will talk over your affairs at our leisure."

"Exactly!" affirmed Antonio with energy.

"You will tell them at home that the traveler will dine here to-day."

Furtive excuses from the invited guest, a slight insistence from Olalla that he should accompany them, and the girls took their leave with the promise that Antonio would go over to call on his grandmother later in the afternoon.

On the way home the blond Maragatan girl exclaimed cheerfully:

"The wind is blowing very strong from the direction of Abesedo; it's surely going to rain!"

And it seemed to Mariflor that the cool breeze from the north that beat into their faces was blowing sorrowfully, with the bitterness of tears. She stopped to listen to its plaintive moaning, as dis-

turbing to her as a foreboding of evil, and Olalla asked in wonder:

"What are you listening to? It's only the call of the peddler."

Between the whistling of the tempestuous wind a voice repeated with melancholy:

"Tienda!—Tienda!"

Antonio Salvadores learned that Don Miguel had in his house a stranger who was leaving for Madrid that same afternoon; and at the suggestion of the priest, the Maragato consented to put off the serious conversation until after his departure.

The host presented one guest to the other with great delicacy; but the dinner hour ran on in silence, due to the preoccupation of each of them, accentuated in the case of Antonio by his extreme curtness and by his aversion to "people of the pen," novelists out searching for types and for remarks which, at the best, publish the names of peaceful citizens in the newspapers.

The merchant glanced at the poet out of the corner of his eye, but without suffering any lack of appetite, and without deigning to speak a word; no effort was necessary on the part of the poet to comprehend the vulgarity of those greedy fingers, and of that thick-lipped mouth, glistening with grease, with its tendency to smile and to swallow in gluttonous haste.

"The idea of a man of that stamp scorning Florinda!"

This thought, arousing strange rebellion in the spirit of Terán, nevertheless placed in his eyes a

shadow of humiliation upon the perfection of the girl he loved.

Gently, against all the impulses of his will, a form of disenchantment furtively began to penetrate the breast of the bard. It galloped rebelliously across the realms of fantasy, in the vanguard of his more noble sentiments. As the difficulties that had stood in the way of this affection disappeared, the planet of desire in the ambitions of Terán began to cool: what a human tribute to the vast restlessness of the imagination, which, in the case of poets, usually holds invincible sway!

As if a gust of wind had suddenly blown the splendid figure of an eagle down from the clouds, leaving it converted into a butterfly, so in the mind of Rogelio the image of Mariflor began to sink to the level of another girl who also was destitute of fortune and of a lover; the brutal disdain of the Maragato had brushed aside the clouds of fantasy.

The poet had just taken his leave of Mariflor, struck by the disturbing impression of these new ideas.

He bore himself as if just as fascinated and devoted as ever, and he renewed the promises and declarations he had made on other days; but in the high emotion of that instant it was only the lips of the girl that held the profound sentiments of a sacred fidelity.

"Now you can indeed return soon," said Florinda, endeavoring to smile. "Now I'm as free as the air! My cousin doesn't want me because I have no dowry, and the well-being of the family no

longer depends upon my marriage; has Don Miguel told you?"

She modestly concealed the meaning in the strange glance she had surprised on Antonio's face; and the gentleman felt his forehead redden as he remembered the grossness with which his sweetheart had been rejected.

"He did say something about it," he stammered, adding, in the violence of his rancor, "you ought not even so much as to speak to such a man as that; you are altogether too humble!"

"But if only he will help out grandmother!"

"Even if he does!"

He promptly gave a sweeter turn to his phrases and to his voice, while the girl kept silence, with all her sorrow concentrated in her eyes.

Rogelio was in a hurry; they were keeping dinner waiting for him, and he must leave Valdecruces in time to catch the train in Astorga at five. He would take the shortest road over the heath, hurrying across the desert waste.

Mariflor also was keeping the midday meal waiting, while the members of the family were gathered in the kitchen, around the steaming olla, commenting upon events and exchanging impressions.

"I will write ever so many letters to you," promised the poet, with an ever-increasing sense of compassion.

"And verses?"

"Yes, indeed!"

He smiled with delight, fascinated by the suddenly conceived idea of intoning bucolic songs to the beautiful muse of the briers and brambles who

dwelt in amorous solitude amidst the eglantine and heather.

The final good-by was spoken with an exchange of fervent words; artistic emotion prevailed above all dangers of inconstancy. Florinda followed her lover out of sight down the street with a glance of ingenuous adoration.

As he passed along the open space around the fountain, the memory of Marinela Salvadores detained him for a moment. The purity of the water and the green and bluish shades of the gentle pool brought tenderly into his mind the image of the girl, with her ever-changing azure eyes, and be recalled that lyric greeting that had so alarmed her at the time of his arrival; what had become of her? He would ask for her before taking his leave; he felt regret at having left in utter neglect the melancholy girl who, one afternoon, had left upon his breast the alms of her mysterious weeping.

All the impressions of those fifteen strange days suddenly flooded the artist's conscience with allurement, as the recollection of a fleeting dream that compelled him to smile.

As he gained the church he raised his eyes to the belfry, and once again the ancient nest of the mother stork aroused his admiration. The fledglings were cronking audaciously beneath the regal wings of the mother, while the father, solicitous as never before, cleared the fields of reptiles and fed his offspring, making incessant flights roundabout the nest.

The silence of the street, the dimness of the light, and the rustic aspect of the picture submerged Terán

in artistic meditations. He gave himself up to the enjoyment of them with the inward pleasure of knowing that he was soon to substitute them for fresher and brighter scenes. He flung into his thoughts, by way of a romantic aureole, the inciting relish of a farewell, the tender pity of an abandonment that does not hurt, the subtle perfidy of one who experiences for each pleasure deflowered intense eagerness for the pleasures yet to be enjoyed.

Of all that unrelenting sweetness nothing stirred him as he sat at table opposite Antonio Salvadores except a sense of repulsion at the churlish merchant who had wakened him, the adventurous grandee, from the most ravishing dream of his life. The dreamer longed to feel pity for himself, as if Antonio had caused him a serious injury in compelling him to go away. He failed to analyze the meaning of that secret joy with which he was taking his departure, or the dark flame of egoism that flared up in his heart when Florinda had appeared before him, free. Nor did it even occur to him to consider that his going was now no longer urgent, nor even opportune; neither his heart nor his logic told either the lover or gentleman that both felicity and loving duty should detain him.

The conversation at the table centered upon the subject of the heir of tío Cristóbal, who had arrived that morning, proceeding from León. Rogelio was silent, and scarcely ate a mouthful; he was nervous and irritable, while the Maragato was devouring a hearty meal. Don Miguel sat observing his friend with a slight sense of confusion, when el Chosco

sent in word that the mule was packed for the journey and stood waiting at the door.

The farewells were brief, the traveler not knowing how to conceal his impatience. The gravedigger, who was officiating as attendant, took to the road with the animal, walking on ahead of Terán, whom the curate accompanied for a short distance.

Halfway down the street the young man turned as if he had forgotten something. Ascensión, who was still standing in the doorway, watching him, asked courteously:

"What is it, have you left anything?"

"Why, Marinela Salvadores. What has become of her? I haven't seen her."

"They say that she has cried herself sick."

"Poor thing!"

"I will tell her that you asked for her."

"Thank you!"

"God go with you; may you have a good journey!"

"Good-by!"

A strange tenseness silenced the two men for a few moments, as they walked on in the direction of the liberating highway.

There had been no time for them to exchange impressions since the arrival of the Maragato, and Don Miguel seemed to be suspicious at the singular attitude of the poet. At last Rogelio broke the silence with some hesitation.

"Did you ever see such a ruffian?" he demanded, whipping the dust off his boots with an osier twig he held between his fingers.

"You have the dove absolutely free now," re-

plied the curate, without mentioning that he placed no confidence in Antonio's rejection of the girl.

Rogelio, evasive, determined to have cause to be very angry, adopted the air of a victim:

"Yes, yes; but it is insufferable to subject one's self to haggling and dickering with a type like that!"

"You risk nothing now through Florinda's charitable desire to help others; that has become quite independent of your love and of your plans."

"Yet, nevertheless, these miserable, niggardly squabbles that inflame noble hearts are repulsive to me, especially when, out in the world, away from here, there is a strong, broad life, wherein a man may struggle and win success."

"Success?" murmured the curate incredulously. "Ah, my friend, in this world almost anything is looked upon as success and attainment! Poor humanity is the same everywhere; born with a propensity for ambition and excitement. And yet, in order to dream, it is necessary to live, and it is necessary to eat in order to live! Because of the fact that we are human, all spiritual redemption has its root in the material. I do my utmost to see that my parishioners are enabled to eat, in order that they may dream of something solid and enduring; if Mariflor helps me this time, may blessings rest upon her!"

The young poet lowered his head, somewhat ashamed and taciturn, overcome by the recollection of the impetuous charity he had so suddenly forgotten, and which but two weeks before had in-

flamed him with its divine glow, lighting his way across the plain.

"You brave fighter, you, who can live scrabbling in the dirt and dreaming of heaven!" he exclaimed in an involuntary outburst of admiration.

"I lead the life destiny marked out for me," replied the curate simply.

Both remained silent, contemplating the poor and desolate landscape which extended between fertile patches and barren plots, furrowed by almost imperceptible trails leading toward the pale belt of a highway that wound ever onward until it became lost in the horizon; it was the same one of which Florinda had caught glimpses one afternoon in April, coming to Valdecruces filled with dreams of love, and overcome by sorrows.

"You must hurry up, sir, if you don't want to miss the train," warned el Chosco.

"Yes; we must say good-by," said Terán. "They are waiting for your return, also."

The priest asked, with a light accent of irony:

"Will you come back soon?"

This phrase, which until a few hours ago would have rung so sweetly in his ears, stirred the conscience of the traveler.

"What doubt can there be of that? As soon as you let me know," he assured cordially.

A strong embrace; a promise of letters; vows of affection and gratitude; and the poet mounted the mule, which trotted off at a firm and steady pace.

Several times the young man turned his head in the direction of his friend, and he found him ever motionless, with his arms crossed upon his breast

in a pensive and reverent attitude. The blackness of his priestly habit stood out strong and clear against the harsh yellow of the fallow grounds.

"Perfidious?" the curate asked himself with infinite sorrow. "No; a visionary, one who is mistaken," he answered himself, hitting the nail on the head. "Poets are usually like children: voluble and cruel. They play with the emotions through mere curiosity, without fear of destroying a heart, whether their own, or another's, and sometimes, with the best intentions in the world. Perhaps of all men, poets, because of their childish mental condition, most deserve the compassionate words: 'Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do!' "

Under the eyes of this noble priestly figure, standing there on the lonely heath, majestic and sad, Rogelio rode away, lost in meditations from every point of view foreign to his love.

"What of the secret of this man," he said to himself, "that vague, white secret I thought I could detect, and which is escaping me, perhaps forever? And these strange, impenetrable people, where did they originate, anyway? Are they of Oriental origin? Berber? Libyo-Iberian? Nordic? They reveal the gloomy dreaminess of the Celts; they possess the stern courage of the Moors, and the frigid seriousness of the Bretons. Perhaps they are descended from the early Mudejares; perhaps——"

The white shelter of the shepherd struck a dominant note in the landscape, and the mental discourse remained cut off on the border of the highway,

where the traveler flung a final glance toward Valdecruces.

Still the silhouette of the priest, black and enduring, left a dot upon the gray plain. The mass of houses could scarcely be distinguished, the indistinct color of their outlines mingling with the diffused shades of roads and mists.

Soon afterward, in the searching eyes of the artist, the black dot and the indistinct lines mingled with the horizon until finally they became obliterated, fused, turned to ashes of the steppe, and to the humble weeds and stubble of the fallow lands.

A flock of doves appeared in the sky in peaceful flight above the poet, and he experienced a sharp thrill of emotion. An impulse caused him to bow his head, his hat in his hand, and upon his lips a kiss which he entrusted as a message for the birds to bear away; something sweet and noble filled his breast so overburdened with morbid cares; something that circulated through the veins of the youth like a diffusion of tenderness and of pity.

The impression was so strong that it promptly assumed the proportions of remorse. For the first time during that tumultuous day the conscience of Terán asked, with repugnance at the question, whether it were possible that he should have thought of abandoning Florinda.

"How could I think of such a thing? How could I consent to think of such a thing?" he mused smilingly. "No! I will return, submissive and faithful, to seek her."

And beneath this gentlemanly intention his weak sentiment concealed irredeemable treason.

During the silent dinner that day Mariflor took singular care to go and come from Marinela's room, to take her toasted bread and milk, sugared water, lavishing upon her words and caresses full of solicitude.

Every instant Mariflor seemed to think she could hear some one calling her, and she left her seat at the table to ask:

"Were you calling me? What do you wish?"

In this maneuver, by which she outwitted the attention of the others, she could manage to leave untouched the portion on her plate and finally take a seat beside the couch of her cousin, who, half dressed, with her back supported against the pillows and her face revealing extreme suffering, was being consumed by some strange illness.

A few moments before, rumors of extraordinary magnitude had floated to the dim corner where the suffering girl lay; the arrival of their cousin Antonio, and the departure of the "outsider," as the poet was called in Valdecruces.

Mariflor found the echoes of her own anguish deep and vibrating, as if a secret instinct told her that her grief found here another heart wherein it might reëcho, resigned and humble.

The air of the room was stifling, and the darkness, settling into the corners, left only a hazy outline of the profiles of the objects within. Mariflor sought the burning hands of the sick girl whose breath came short and quick.

"Are you worse?" she asked.

"Much worse."

"Really?"

"Don't you see that I am?"

The disconsolate question rang in Florinda's ears like a reproach.

"No, I don't see that you are," she replied bending anxiously over the couch; she could discover only the yellow outline of a face and the disquieting shadow of a pair of eyes. Stung with pity, she searched her recollection of the last few days when Marinela had come home weeping and half delirious, telling of the death of tío Cristóbal. Just as she had stammered out her story, crying convulsively, "I can't, I can't," so when they urged her to eat and to sleep she often replied with the same plaintive cry:

"I can't; I can't!"

The habit of seeing her suffer and of leaving her to dream resulted in relegating the feverish and lonely girl to the desolation of her room.

The women would pass through, each pressed by the urgent haste of her own task and the burden of her own preoccupations, and would ask:

"Do you want anything?"

"Water," she would always reply.

At night when Olalla would take her place in the bed beside the sick girl she would experience an instant of uneasiness.

"You have an odor of fever on your breath," she would say, "and you are very hot."

But soon she would be overcome by sleep, and in the morning, work, enwrapping her in its rude vassalage, would fling her outside her home to take the place of la Chosca in bringing in wood and in caring for the stable.

Tía Dolores was rapidly falling into a state of decrepitude, as if some one were shoving her down from the height of her will power and strength; Ramona struggled furiously in the rye fields, hoeing among the lusty weeds that had suddenly made their appearance there because of the softness of the soil after the irrigation. If she ever stopped for a moment in the alcove where her daughter lay it was only to wrinkle her brow still more ferociously and to give expression to gloomy forebodings as a result of the witchcraft of tía Gertrudis.

It was not strange that the sick girl, lying in the hollow of her bed, received Mariflor as a ray of sunshine. During those three days of exasperated suffering several times a pleading voice from the alcove had called:

"Come here! Stay with me a little while!"

And another voice, hurried, nervous, would reply:

"Coming! After a while! Pretty soon!"

In the heartbreaking sorrow of her grief and her fears Florinda had found no time to respond to the plaintive call. And Marinela waited, consumed by hidden anxieties, obsessed by the thought that the enamored spirit of the gentleman with the blue eyes dwelt in the person of her cousin.

When the two girls sought each other in the mirror of their pupils the darkness spoke to them of nothing except anxieties, fears, and questions.

"Where do you feel pain?" Mariflor wished to know.

"Not anywhere; I am tormented by fear and by thirst."

"And what are you afraid of?"

"Of dying—and of other things."

"But you're going to live; you're going to get well, and become one of the Poor Clares."

"No, no."

"Don't you want to do so any longer?"

"Why, yes," said the girl with a slight display of indecision; "but I have no endowment."

"We will get one for you."

"You?"

"All of us together."

"If only you were to marry our cousin, who is so rich!"

"That is impossible!"

"Then—the other one," suggested the girl, giving way to her impatience.

"God knows! Or no one at all. But anyway, among all of us we will get together the endowment for you, if that is what will make you happy."

The idea of happiness brought a sense of confusion and strangeness, as if that were still another cloud hanging over this childish spirit, over this gentle soul which was dominated by thirst and fear, as was the feverish flesh that clothed it.

Of the many perplexities of her imagination, Marinela could define but a single one: that of having Florinda at her side and coming into contact with her delicate, youthful beauty, wherein all miraculous aspirations seemed possible. Listening to the voice of her cousin, gazing into her face, Marinela would feel her nebulous dreams become more clear, as if a ray of sunshine gave them form and direction. To the ambitious child Florinda was the human reality of all her ineffable yearning;

something like a glorious realization of whatever chimeras and rebellions were forged in that childish heart, unrestrained and wounded.

"Don't go," she would plead endearingly.

"But I'm going to stay with you all the afternoon," promised Mariflor kindly.

"Have you said good-by yet?" asked Marinela, vibrant with curiosity.

"Yes."

"Will he come back soon?"

"He said he would."

"Will he write to you very often?"

"Verses and letters," confessed the girl.

She felt that of the entire household only the heart of this girl was friendly to her love, and for the first time she spoke to her in confidence and in secret.

"Romances!" murmured the child, her voice suddenly filled with illusion. Closing her eyes, in a spasm of sentimental delight, she added:

"Won't you say for me those verses we heard spoken by the wandering actress that night, and that we learned by heart?"

Florinda began to repeat the verses with a silvery ring, as if the crystal of her soul were resounding through the words; and the patient child listened, bathing her spirit in the waves of the mournful song with such violent rapture that she seemed to feel the sudden chill of foaming breakers on her flesh.

"Enough, enough," she moaned, "it hurts me!"

"What hurts you?"

"The verses—my thoughts."

"Sleep a little; it isn't good for you to talk

so much," advised Mariflor, alarmed at the appearance of delirium.

But the child suddenly asked with extreme seriousness:

"And you, where are you going to sleep tonight?"

"Oh, I don't know!"

"With grandmother?"

The girl shuddered; a strong repugnance compelled her to exclaim:

"No!"

"Then who with? There are no other beds."

"Even if I have to sleep on la Chosca's bench."

"For goodness' sake! Why that corner smells bad! It smells of something strong, just like cheese when it's getting rancid!"

Struck by an irresistible loathing, Mariflor rose to her feet with an instinct of flight. Where should she sleep that night?

"Out in the open; in the garden; in the yard," she thought, heroic and rebellious.

Marinela, failing to notice her secret apprehension, murmured as if filled with emotion:

"Listen!"

"What?"

"Has he gone?"

The allusion, tacit and sweet, vibrated with the trembling of a dart.

"Yes, he must be riding along far down the road by now," said Florinda bitterly.

Her words rang out with a sharp echo, as if the horizons of the traveler were expanding into a pilgrimage into the infinite.

"If only one could be a dove!" exclaimed the sick girl with fervent enthusiasm.

A vision of untrammeled wings, of azure skies, of joyous spaces, of love and of light, in a sharp thrill of the imagination, deprived Florinda of thought. Suddenly she realized the implacable heaviness of the atmosphere with such a sense of nausea and repulsion that an indomitable impulse prompted her to say:

"I am going out for a moment; I'll be back at once." And she rushed breathlessly from the room.

Seeking air and light, she reached the little parlor and stopped short before the three women of the house who were seated ceremoniously around the wall as if expecting a visit, having forgotten their daily tasks, it seemed.

The old grandmother had somewhat recovered herself; her eyes were eager and her posture solicitous, while Ramona sat doubled over in her chair, vanquished by her customary labor of digging furrows and irrigating ditches, while the fleecy and glossy Toledan shawl Olalla had on formed a frame for her impassive countenance.

Mariflor did not know how to escape the censure of the strange group; it was as silent as a tribunal, and she murmured, half terrified:

"Marinela ought to have a visit from the doctor."

"We still owe him the rye we agreed to pay him for his last visits," said Ramona, intensifying the gloomy severity of her countenance.

"It doesn't matter; he should be sent for," Florinda ventured to reply.

Olalla, flushing with the carmine of remorse, sprang to her feet, stammering:

"Is she worse?"

"She has fever."

"She must be given water that has stood out of doors all night."

"And she must have a hot drink to-night," added her mother.

"I will go in to see her," decided Olalla, leaving the parlor with her short, sedate steps, only to return promptly at a quicker gait, exclaiming: "She's not in the bed!"

"How is that?"

"Come, come, see for yourself!"

The two girls rushed in together, and the two mothers came screaming behind them.

"Sorcery, sorcery!" howled Ramona, while the grandmother, without understanding the reason for such alarm, brought up the rear, lamenting:

"Alas, alas!"

Groping in the darkness, they all touched the empty couch with their hands, and Ramona threw herself across it face downward shouting out incantations and exorcisms with demented superstition. Tía Dolores sank down beside her, moaning:

"Alas, alas!"

The girls searched for Marinela in every corner; she could not have run very far in so short a time, half dressed and weak as she was.

In the stupefaction of this new worry, the child's phrase of longing still rang in Florinda's ears: "If only one could be a dove!" And making her way up the dimly lighted stairway with her face filled with

hope she gained the light-flooded crest of the dovecote, and there among the bustling young pigeons and the downy nests she found poor Marinela, shivering and shrinking, sunk to her knees on the floor.

"What are you doing, child?" she cried, hurrying to assist her to her feet. But Marinela laid a finger on her lips in a gesture of silence.

"Hush-sh-sh!" Don't you hear a sound as of fluttering wings? Listen!"

"Yes; it is the flock coming back," replied Florinda, looking out to receive the wanderers, transported also by indescribable longing.

"From which direction are they coming?"

"From the plain, from the highway."

Suddenly the dovecote resounded with the timorous flapping of terrified wings.

Perhaps when the wind had whirled the tear-wet sobs across the plain that sorrowful afternoon, a slight sense of alarm had clung to the outspread wings; perhaps on their bills, and concealed among their feathers, the doves were bringing a deceptive and perfidious message. If the tempestuous return of the messengers complied with a fateful purpose, Florinda received it on her lips, drinking it in with all her heart, standing in the chilly air stirred by the flapping wings, glancing at the overcast sky with her eyes filled with tears, while Marinela awaited it on her knees, her forehead inclined, her neck bent, like some humble creature sentenced to final execution.

CHAPTER XVI

THE TRAGEDY

CHOKING with fury, trembling with anger, Antonio Salvadores strode away from his second conference with Don Miguel, after having declared that only through a marriage with Florinda would he remedy the afflictions of his relatives.

He had hurled the contradictory declaration of his intentions with the haste of one who is relieving himself of a crushing burden. Hurriedly, half vanquished by timidity and shame, he went on to say:

"I will marry her, and then we will fix up these affairs without too much damage being done."

Although the curate had foreseen capitulation, he had not expected it to come so promptly. With his customary prudence, he smiled and endeavored to palliate the harshness of his reply by resorting to diplomacy in order not to wound too deeply the masculine pride of a Maragato, since they are by nature haughty and arrogant.

"Hombre," he said, "we must go more slowly. The girl heard you when you rejected her; how do you expect her to love you now? Probably she is offended, hurt——"

"She?" doubted Antonio as if wondering if it could be possible for a woman to adopt so serious

a determination as to become offended. Then after that presumptuous doubt another suspicion opened an obscure passageway through his mind. Suppose Mariflor were not like other women? It was true she did seem to be different.

"You will tell her that I was mistaken," suggested the young man; "that I did not know how to express myself; that you did not understand me aright, and that I did not dare to explain myself to you; any excuse you can think of that might not occur to me."

Such courtesy and foresight were indications of a firm determination to win, and Don Miguel, perplexed, entrusted the solution of the troublous conflict to Providence, insisting only, as a means of precaution against a sudden repulsion, that Florinda was extremely sensitive, delicate of thought, mistress and sole authority over her will through the express desire of her father.

"Then you will have to come to an understanding with her," Antonio said.

"No, that's for you to do!"

"I?"

"Naturally."

"You don't know me; I'm no good at talking this sort of thing over with a girl; besides, it is not the custom here."

"But your cousin is a city-bred woman, intelligent and reasonable, and you are a man educated in modern ways yourself."

"I am just the same as I was before, Don Miguel; and I become dumb and silly when trying to handle matters of delicacy. I want to marry Mariflor;

you help me out, and I'll do whatever is necessary for our little old grandmother."

Clinging with tenacity to his desire, his face flaming, and his manner restless, the aspirant to Mariflor's hand refused to take another step along the path which he wished to follow.

It was late in the afternoon when the priest conducted his guest to the house of tía Dolores, promising that he would try to penetrate the disposition of Mariflor and to save the young man as far as possible from direct negotiations with his cousin.

The visitors entered the great front door and looked into the parlor from the hall, and, finding no one to receive them, went on into the kitchen. Perhaps their own footsteps, resounding heavily from the tiles, and the sonorous pounding of Don Miguel's cane, prevented them from hearing stifled voices and furtive sobs in the direction of Marinela's alcove.

The child, having been surprised in the dovecote, had just made her appearance, docile as a lamb, clinging to the hand of Mariflor, and she was received with terror, as a spirit from the other world. Her mother was rushing about the room declaring that the old usurer had frightened the girl out of her wits with satanic intent. To these distracted lamentations the other two women formed an ominous chorus, prophesying evil; in vain Florinda tried to explain that no doubt, in her feverish condition, feeling the need of air, Marinela had climbed up to the open refuge of the doves in her delirium.

Neither denying nor assenting, perhaps hypnotized by the superstition of sorcery, Marinela

groaned, throwing herself back into the bed again and allowing her mother to cover her with a red blanket.

"You must have a good sweating," ordered Ramona, "so as to get the cold out of your chest."

And the terrible coverlet was wrapped furiously around the feverish little body.

"I am thirsty!" wailed the girl, sobbing bitterly.

"Not a drop of water, not a single one!" sentenced her mother severely.

And then the voice of Don Miguel resounded impatiently:

"Ho, everybody, where are you?"

Promptly the Salvadores women made their appearance in the kitchen, leaving the invalid alone with Mariflor, stifling in the stale, heavy air of the room. She was not allowed to remain there very long, however; soon her name was called by solicitous voices, and she presented herself timidly, her heart filled with incertitude.

The early darkness of that dull afternoon had already begun to overspread the kitchen, and Antonio had selected the dimmest corner wherein to conceal his gayly bedecked person; near him sat the three women, barely distinguishable, so that as Florinda entered she saw no one but the curate who was standing in the dusky light that sifted through the tiny, smoke-begrimed windowpanes.

At an indication from the curate, Florinda, wondering, followed him toward the little parlor, and, scarcely had she crossed the threshold than the two spoke softly for an instant, while at the lower end

of the kitchen a few words were exchanged in cautious and prudent tones.

Following the gloomy pathway of these sounds, Mariflor walked directly up to her cousin; she placed her soft hands on his shoulders as she had done that morning, and she said to him briskly but regretfully:

"I was not asking anything of you for myself; and even if you were to give me all the gold in the world I could not care for you, either now or ever!"

A few violent phrases spoken in the gloomy voice of a woman broke the stillness, and a brusque motion wrested Antonio's body from beneath the girl's fingers. Having delivered herself of her deep secret, she sought refuge beside the priest who had followed her in from the parlor and was again standing in the center of the kitchen in the fading light that entered the window.

"And—then——?" interrogated Olalla with incredible animosity.

"Antonio must speak," said the curate with restraint.

After a long silence, when it had begun to seem impossible that the young man would make any reply, he overcame his timidity and rancor, and exclaimed with a spirited display of determination:

"Then I say that I will do nothing! You already know that!"

Sobs and wails drowned the brutal assertion, and there under cover of the darkness the name of the "outsider" was pronounced with hatred accompanied by threats. Every harsh and cruel malediction hurled by Ramona was repeated mechanically by tía Dolores, while Olalla, more prudent and just,

devoted herself to a consideration of their common misfortune with plaintive sighs:

"Oh, my poor brothers! Oh, my poor little old grandmother!"

In the other room, Marinela, her body and her soul burning with fever, startled by these strange cries, ventured also to wail:

"I am thirsty!"

"What a scandal! This is an absolute disgrace!" declared Don Miguel in amazement. "Silence!" he ordered, while the end of his cane pounded furiously on the tiled floor.

When at last an appearance of tranquillity became reëstablished the sound of deeply agitated breathing could be heard, accompanied by a movement of uneasiness, as if Antonio had risen to his feet and stood gasping in the dark.

He had understood that this gentleman "of the pen," that man who had seemed to him so detestable with his airs of superiority, who had been invited to Valdecruces by Don Miguel, and who had come here making such a fine display of spangles and romances, and who had very little hard cash in his pocket, had snatched away his promised bride. And, in the name of God, he would not submit to it, not so easily as people imagined!

By the laws of the Maragatos, on the honor of his race, he, Antonio Salvadores, gave his oath to it.

With the smack of a kiss upon the fleshy cross made by his index finger and thumb, Antonio gave testimony to his haughty vows, and, arrogant and bold as never before, he asked:

"How much is needed to keep all of you from crying?"

The stupor produced by these words silenced his auditors, until Florinda, half incredulous, perhaps not a little mortified, said quietly:

"To keep them from crying, a great deal of money is needed!"

"How much?"

Issuing from the depths of the obscurity, the insistence of this question seemed rather fantastic. And Florinda, vacillating, as if she were talking to a hobgoblin in her dreams, or were replying to a conjuror, enumerated:

"Don Miguel must be given four thousand pesetas at once."

"What more?"

"Three thousand are owing to tío Cristóbal."

"We owe the doctor for his visits."

"And the apothecary thirty reales," announced a voice from the shadows.

"What more?" persisted Antonio with such energy that Mariflor, making a wild guess, added explicitly:

"A thousand dollars to replace the cattle and build up the estate. A thousand more so that Marinela can join the Poor Clares!"

A bench creaked beneath the sudden weight of a form, while a voice pronounced disconsolately:

"Well, I will give it!"

"All?" asked Ramona, delirious with avarice.

"All—if I marry her; you people are witnesses."

"It is impossible—impossible!"

The indomitable repulsion was stifled by insurgent voices.

"I can receive Isidoro!" stammered the grandmother with extraordinary lucidity. And Ramona, in a sudden outburst of tenderness, sweetened her lips to exclaim:

"My children, my children!"

But Antonio had caught the sound of the word "impossible" issuing from the direction where the light was still shining, and, more valorous now that he was under the cover of the darkness, he sounded a final warning in a lusty voice that stifled the lamentations of the women:

"I am not going begging for a bride! I place conditions on the protection you ask of me; if they don't suit, then good-by! You needn't say another word to me about the trials and tribulations of this household!"

"*Dios mío, Dios mío!*" wailed Mariflor, overcome by terror at the blackness of her situation, which seemed to be growing ever more dense, where the hostile voices of destiny seemed to be placing a rampart roundabout her innocent joy.

Suddenly the wall of shadows that shot phrases at the heart of the young girl like darts stirred with a sinister movement, and living portions of the implacable fortress advanced toward Florinda in the form of three pleading and desperate women.

The unhappy girl wished to turn to Don Miguel for support; but his priestly habits gathered to themselves the ever-increasing darkness in so severe a manner that she was also overcome by fear of the motionless figure that sat so silent and austere.

In this state of siege and desolation Florinda turned and fled, pursued by her own tormented cries. Dashing through the little parlor, she crossed the yard, and then ran blindly down the street in the pale light of the early sunset.

When the women became aware of Mariflor's impromptu flight their howling ceased, and in their haste to seek a solution of the urgent problem of the marriage, it occurred to Olalla to light the lamp. Although the sputtering wick did not illuminate a very wide space, the figure of Antonio was dimly outlined by its yellow glow as he sat in his corner trembling with impatience.

The Maragato was wiping the copious perspiration from his brow with a colored handkerchief, and he seemed to be extremely tired, as if exhausted at that moment by the most arduous day's work of his entire life.

"That man, with all his sponging, shan't get her away from me!" he growled. "When I set out to get a thing there is no one to gainsay me in the whole kingdom of León."

Boastfully, arrogantly, he strode from the bench on which he had been sitting toward the fireplace and back again, twisting his poor handkerchief into a hard roll, and delivering rapid strokes with it in the bellicose attitude of an ancient hidalgo grasping one of the two-edged Leonese swords.

But this caricature of a desperado, so out of keeping with the mild disposition of Antonio Salvadores, did not arrest the attention of the women as did the

utter quietude of the priest, who sat silent, as if suddenly struck dumb, in the center of the room.

"Father! Don Miguel! *Señor cura!*" shrieked three voices, in an outpouring of affectionate and insinuating words in their endeavor to arouse their protector from his absorption.

"You are right!" he murmured, gathering himself together, as if his spirit were returning from a long journey. "I should speak some word of consolation to you at this moment—but you can see for yourselves: the girl cannot love her cousin; your cousin will not favor you otherwise, and I cannot and will not corrupt the sentiments of a maiden to influence her to deeds of charity at the cost of perfidy."

He spoke slowly, calmly. His determination, however, not to intervene further in this sorrowful affair seemed to be weakening; and his words, in part escaping the understanding of his hearers, seemed to be the result of a brief examination of conscience.

Don Miguel Fidalgo, mystic and pious, with his soul glowing in the light of earthly sacrifices, had cherished the hope that, for the sake of her love for the family, Mariflor would achieve the sublime act of taking a cross upon her shoulders. The curate knew many secrets of divine compensations; he trusted but little in the constancy of Rogelio Terán, and, fearing the tenuous joy the poet would be able to offer, he imagined he might win for her a happiness more enduring by her taking advantage of the seeming inevitable sorrow of a life lived for the

benefit of other helpless creatures as a foundation for immortal joys.

Viewed in the light of these lofty aims, Don Miguel's mirages might have been beautiful; but now, looked at from close range, in contact with the savage passions and deep aversions which the heroine must overcome, a vertigo of material sorrows concealed from the dreamer the exalted effulgence of the sacrifice he had imagined; consoling theories, secret hopes, and recondite desires were towers of wind before the barbaric onslaught of the sordid scene he had just witnessed. The harsh reality of that contact produced in the apostle the sensation of a fall from the clouds to earth. Convinced that he had dreamed of human capabilities from too lofty a height, he awoke repentant, full of compassion and regret, as if his hope of the marriage were a crime in the impending tragedy. Pierced with remorse over the tumult of such afflictions, he heard Olalla say:

"The bad luck of her not loving this man is because of the other one."

"Because of your friend!" hissed Olalla's mother, in a sudden outburst of hostility.

This reminder stung the curate as the most serious mistake he had made since Mariflor's life had come under his influence in Valdecruces; it seemed to him incredible that he could have allowed himself to be so stirred by romantic sentiment as to have for a single day shared with the inexperienced girl illusions centered upon a knight-errant, a butterfly that fluttered through every garden, an enamored vagabond, as noble in intent as insecure

in purpose. His distrust of his friend being aroused now that he was far away, it increased in the mind of the priest as he recalled the strange haste with which Terán had taken his leave. At the precise moment when his sweetheart was freed of moral ties which she herself had attached to her promise through compassion, the lover went away impatient, reserved, unintelligible. Perhaps already he was riding along on the train tempted by every attraction life has to offer, while upon the ambitious crest of his thoughts the idea of duty threw no more than a few fleeting rays!

This painful possibility impelled the priest to look with sorrowful commiseration upon human weakness, and to allow a benign pity to hold sway over those rude spirits stifled by the brutal weight of ignorance and of cruel exigencies. He endeavored to stir the hearts beneath the denseness of their intelligence, requesting affection and compassion for Florinda, and wishing to believe once more that the rebellious attitude of the girl toward Antonio was in obedience to a just revenge, rather than to the rivalry to which Olalla alluded.

The Maragato, quite in contrast with his recent display of braggadocio, becoming more optimistic and conciliatory, hastened to calm matters without abdicating his native pride, by saying benevolently:

"Yes, the girl doesn't like me because of that other man, just as you say!"

Olalla and her mother did not show themselves to be deeply convinced by such ideas, and remained restless and troubled because of the definite failure

of the marriage; while tía Dolores, failing to comprehend the magnitude of the disaster, feared only a complication in the matrimonial negotiations. Looking Don Miguel squarely in the eyes, she asked fearfully:

"Eh! What is that they're saying? Why has the girl run off?"

But her voice was silenced by the hasty footsteps of the boys who were returning from Piedralbina with their knapsacks over their shoulders and a questioning expression on their faces.

"Mariflor was running around, crying," they said as they entered the room.

"Where?"

"Through the rye field."

The youngsters adored their cousin, and their uneasiness gave them courage, despite the presence of the curate, to inquire the reason of Mariflor's racing which they had been unable to check.

"She will be back soon," promised the curate; "she will come back filled with affection for all of you, and as good and kind as ever!"

"Yes, she will come back; there is no meanness about her!" exclaimed Antonio with ill-concealed impatience.

Leaving the room before the sputtering lamp burned out, in the hall he overtook the priest, who was making his farewells.

"I am leaving in the morning; what word shall I take with me?" he asked solicitously.

"Of what?"

"Of the marriage."

"Why, as you see, none whatever!"

"But—that writer from Madrid, will he be coming back?"

"I think not."

"Well, then——?"

Don Miguel shrugged his shoulders; annoyed and disgusted by such churlish persistence, he repeated mentally the grave words of Mariflor: "Impossible! Impossible!"

The youth did not seem to understand the eloquence of his silence nor the expression of his gestures; and although Olalla came bringing the lamp, her cousin apparently seemed to think he was still in the dark, for he declared magnanimously:

"I still hold to my offer."

When no reply came he added even more generously:

"I will await her 'yes' or her 'no'—until Christmas."

"You will still await her 'no'?" said Don Miguel with an involuntary smile.

Marinela, who was listening to the murmur of voices near her alcove, pleaded once again:

"I am thirsty!"

"Let that child have a drink of water," admonished the priest before going.

Standing on the threshold of the wide doorway he seemed to recall something he had forgotten, and he stopped a moment, saying:

"I want you to consider that as far as I am concerned you owe me nothing."

"And that four thousand——?" Antonio began.

"Nothing, nothing," interrupted the priest resolutely and hastily.

But even yet he turned toward his parishioners and, looking Ramona directly in the eye, he said with a meaningful tone:

"Florinda has no mother; do not forget that!"

Before consenting to return to the house that night Mariflor made only the submissive request that Olalla should be up waiting for her rather late, after the rest of the family had gone to bed.

From the home of the curate where she had sought refuge after her breathless race, she was accompanied by Ascensión and her mother as far as the door of the little parlor.

To no one but Olalla might the emotion of fear and dread with which she again stepped into the dark kitchen have been apparent; but with her eyes heavy with sleep, she saw nothing more than a dim outline of her cousin advancing cautiously on tiptoe.

Then the silence was softly broken by a lament over her failure to bring her heart into conformity with her desire to help the family in their hour of need.

"God does not wish to work the miracle; He does not wish to!" she sobbed with such penetrating desolation that Olalla was impelled to open her arms.

"Don't cry!" she replied magnanimously.

Olalla's sturdy breast, so frequently impassive, melted in maternal tenderness as it took unto itself the heavy sorrow of the other woman.

The wellspring of grief flowed so incessantly from the wounded soil of her heart that Olalla felt it running like a torrent burdened with infinite

sorrow. The imperious desire to offer consolation rose to the girl's breast, and her sweetest and most kindly sentiments gave expression to the eloquent words:

"Don't you want a piece of pancake, and a little wine that Antonio left?"

As Mariflor made no reply, she continued:

"I was saving it for Marinela, but you can have it."

"No, no, thank you," Mariflor managed to stammer at last.

But Olalla insisted with such extreme solicitude that Mariflor was forced to pretend that she had already had her supper. Together they penetrated the darkness of the passageway, and Olalla set the candle down on the floor between the doors of two adjoining rooms.

"I am not going to undress myself, because I have to get up at sunrise," she said, accompanying her cousin as far as their grandmother's bed.

Florinda, hearing that Antonio was leaving very early, pleaded, with a shudder:

"Don't call me at that time."

"No, child, we will get up together, my mother and I."

They spoke in subdued tones, and they stood for a moment looking silently at the old woman, who lay asleep with her mouth wide open.

Lying outstretched in the semi-obscurity with gruesome rigidity, the silent figure so resembled a corpse that Mariflor approached in alarm to touch it.

"She is cold!" she said tremulously.

But Olalla, imperturbable as ever, replied:

"Old people are always cold, and they say that it is harmful to let young folks sleep with them, because they take away their heat. That is why grandmother always sleeps alone."

A slight hissing, heavily labored, attested the breathing of the old woman, and outside, another, a bolder whistling, told of the rigors of the storm.

The rain burst sonorously upon the silky thatch of the roof, and the whole house was rocked by the weeping and sighing of the night.

"*Dios mío*, how gloomy!" murmured Florinda, beginning to undress.

She had placed a pillow at the foot of the bed, and cautiously turning back the covers, slipped in between them without touching the old woman. The irresistible loathing and disgust that she had felt before took possession of her again on the outer edge of the mattress, and shoved her over so far that she was at the point of falling to the floor. She resisted almost harshly when Olalla started to draw the covers over her, and she would not allow her neck or her bare arms to come into contact with the sheet.

"Why, you're as cold as grandmother herself!" protested Olalla.

"Never mind, never mind!" stammered Mariflor, not knowing what to say, almost shaking with cold notwithstanding the closeness of the atmosphere; then she added thoughtfully:

"And you, are you going to sit up all night? Aren't you cold and sleepy?"

"Cold in the month of July? For mercy's sake!

As for being tired, I am always that; now I'll put out the light and go in quietly and throw myself down beside Marinela."

"Is she better?"

"I don't know; we gave her water and she fell asleep; but she is burning hot, and every little while she seems to be trembling."

"We must call the doctor."

"Mother is afraid because of his bill."

"But we must send for him," insisted Florinda, drawing a deep sigh.

The grandmother turned over slightly, the girl lying there on the edge of the mattress trembled, and Olalla said:

"Go to sleep; it is very late."

She went out on tiptoe, put out the light with a lusty blow, and was about to enter her alcove when a low call from Mariflor detained her.

"Listen! That noise, somewhere near here; it isn't the wind or the rain; where does it come from?"

Olalla listened an instant, and stifled her laughter as she replied:

"It's 'he'—it's Antonio snoring; are you afraid?"

CHAPTER XVII

THE SORROW OF LOVING

DURING those sorrowful hours of profound weeping, how many gloomy thoughts swept through the mind of Florinda!

Her lover did not write; he maintained silence, he seemed to have vanished like a fleeting shadow; to have forgotten the rôle of Don Quixote he had assumed while crossing the plains leading to the "forgotten towns."

Every day when Fabián Alonso, mounted on his gray nag, delivered the scanty correspondence in Valdecruces, Florinda would try to encounter him. When mail time came around she would slip into the tiny garden in prudent vigilance. She had learned to use a hoe, and, under the skilled direction of Olalla, she began to clear the paths and to clean the streets, taking up the task at precisely six o'clock in the afternoon, just when tío Alonso might be expected to make his appearance on the outskirts of the town before turning down the street upon which opened the main door of the dwelling. No sooner did she see him than an intense emotion overcame her, and whatever anxieties had concealed their springs in the roots of her desire now began to whirl madly roundabout the fateful mail pouch.

At these moments of suspense there was not a movement along the ground or in the sky which, to

her, did not assume the proportions of a miraculous sign of prophecy; the tender cooing of the doves, the gentle flight of a butterfly, the murmur of the brook, the placid changes on the horizon, were messengers of smiling promise. The departure of the flock in silence, the hush of the streamlet, or the whirling of a tuft of cloud across a clear space in the sky would arouse in her cruel anxiety; and so, the yearning centered upon the tender missive that surely would not fail to come, produced indescribable martyrdom, aggravated by a thousand annoying trifles.

Sometimes, dominated by a single fervid sentiment, Mariflor would give rein to a strong impulse toward superstition, or again she would become the ardent Christian believer. Now her lips would thrill with the tremor of supplication, entrusting to God all the anxiety that filled her loving heart, or again her eyes would drink at the fountain of imaginary meanings, and her never-sleeping fantasy would forge its chimeras upon a flower, a thorny bush, a cloud converted into a talisman; and each new disappointment as it stung and wounded with its perfidy, would arouse in her mind a new stimulus, refining her love through pain.

Florinda asked no questions of Don Miguel; neither did the priest need to interrogate the girl. When they met they would look each other directly in the eyes with their customary habit of interpreting thoughts; in his she read reproach and hostility toward the absent lover, while in hers, in reply to his tacit accusation, he saw pardons and excuses.

Many more anxious days ran on than Mariflor would have believed possible for her to bear. She went about like a somnambulist, living, to all outward appearances, but with frantic egoism, detached from whatever was not concerned with bringing news of her lover. Both bread and sleep tasted to her of tears; air and sunshine were an injury; the bonds that united her to the home, intolerable slavery.

She avoided Marinela, who called her persistently from her couch, with a single ardent question on her lips, and she tried to avoid all intimacy, working alone in the garden or in the field, converting herself into a gardener with absurd indifference, neither aching with weariness nor suffering from the heat of the sun. She scarcely knew anything of Olalla and Ramona, who, after their labor in the fields, would appear in the kitchen at night silent and hungry, stoic, impassive. Her grandmother, more incapacitated now than ever, would sit moaning in the corner, her heart weary with so much suffering, and the boys would come home from school barefooted and ragged but Florinda gave no heed.

Filled with generosity toward the ingrate, unable to conceive the idea of his willful neglect, she even came to believe that he was dead. She imagined accidents, unforeseen events, and illnesses; she tormented herself with the most tragic suppositions, and became attracted toward death by an almost irresistible longing; the carmine of her cheeks grew pale, her step became unsteady, and her eyes, like two sleeping suns, lost their accustomed warm clarity.

One afternoon when she awaited the arrival of tío Fabían from the shelter of the garden, hearing the clanking of the horseshoes against the stone, she was compelled to sink to her knees to keep from falling. She waited motionless, worn with anguish, and the old man, who usually glanced at her with gratification and curiosity, peering over the wall just as on other days, gave a wink by way of greeting, and murmured sympathetically:

"Until you have scared away the witch you won't receive a letter."

The girl staggered to her feet to follow the leading of this suggestion, and it seemed to her she could catch a glimpse of tía Gertrudis leaning on her staff, just turning the corner with her short, halting steps.

Thirst for love and hunger for happiness lent strength to Florinda to dash off in pursuit of the old woman, but the solitary and mysterious street down which she thought she had disappeared revealed no trace of her.

Florinda continued walking on at random, fired with desire to seek in the beclouded eyes of the incomprehensible woman and in her broken voice reasons for the malediction which had descended from old grandfather Juan to his innocent granddaughter.

The afternoon sun was still shining, splendid and sweet. July, as it drew to a close, stirred the waving fan of the golden grain with a gentle breeze that assumed a whispering as of waves.

It had not rained since that sorrowful night when Mariflor Salvadores had wept bitterly for long hours in company with the storm. The earth, red and

parched, dying of thirst, emitted acrid perfumes at every paroxysm of the tortured vegetation.

Aromas of wild plants and murmurs of bees and insects offered their refreshing caress to the desolate girl as soon as she had crossed the boundaries of the village.

Knowing that tía Gertrudis lived in a district not far from the harvest field, with blind impulse, Mariflor followed along the path leading toward the open country, determined and absorbed, as if traveling directly toward the infinite. Suddenly, on the border of a near-by path, she came upon Rosicler.

"Where are you going?" called the shepherd in surprise, barring her pathway.

She hesitated, forgetting for the moment what hope it had been that was leading her along that course, and then, suddenly recalling her errand, she said in a subdued voice:

"I was going to see tía Gertrudis."

"The witch?"

"We don't know for sure whether or not she is a witch," replied Florinda, somewhat ashamed of suspecting the same thing as did the ignorant shepherd boy.

"They say she is, and that she gives all of your people the evil eye because of a grudge she had against your grandfather."

As the shepherd lad stood talking he was strangely stirred by the sight of the dusky hair and the gloomy expression of the girl.

"Are you in poor health?" he asked, deeply touched.

"I'm all right," she stammered mechanically.

"It seems to me you're thinner," he murmured regretfully. Then, seeing that the girl wished to pass on, he added:

"Do you know where the house of the witch is?"

"No."

"Then how are you going to find it?"

Somewhat disconcerted, Mariflor tried to continue on her way, but the youth detained her.

"I'll show you," he said. "You don't need to go around the plowed fields. The way we go to town, a little off to the right, there's a narrow trail, and on beyond that, where you see a cabin with quite a lot of windows and a very sharp-pointed roof, that's it!"

But Florinda was weeping bitterly.

She did not understand why her emotions, which had lain as if atrophied and inert beneath the harshness of her suffering, should melt at the contact of Rosicler's kindness. For many days she had experienced a longing to weep, without attaining the relief of tears; but scarcely had the shepherd boy placed his devotion at the service of her secret sorrow than the tempest in her heart broke through her burning eyes; a fraternal sentiment softened the inclemency of her stifled suffering and loosened the harsh ligatures of silence and restraint in her poor, tormented breast.

Feeling the force of firm and active support, Mariflor experienced a change of mind, and she replied to Rosicler:

"After all, I think I won't go to see tía Gertrudis; I must be going home."

"And why are you crying?"

"Oh, because."

This irrefutable logic somewhat disconcerted the youth, but soon he recovered himself and declared:

"I know why: because the stranger went away before we had 'laid the track' for you. The *señor cura* didn't want us to."

Abandoning herself to the consolation of weeping, Florinda did not reply, and, following her along the narrow paths through the grain, the shepherd pondered over the reasons for her weeping. He had heard it said that the girl was sought in marriage by Antonio Salvadores, and it was almost incredible that with a pretender to her hand of such solidity, wealth, and power, she should be sighing for a stranger—a nearsighted and weakly man of the city.

"That can't be possible," he argued, speaking aloud, as if talking to himself.

Suddenly an enlightening thought seemed to give him the key to the enigma.

"You're crying," he said stoutly, "because of the bad news the priest has had from overseas."

"Has he had bad news?"

"My brother has written. He says in his letter that Uncle Isidoro has consumption, and that he is in the last stages; that Pedro's father wants him to come over there, and that——"

"But to whom has he written all this?"

"To us, with the envelope addressed to Don Miguel, and another letter like it came the same day from Martín. I saw them lying on the table when I went after the letter from my brother."

Suddenly filled with dread and anxiety, Mariflor

aroused herself from her unhappy dream of disappointed love to the stern realities of life. Her tears were dried by the heat of her remorse, and the harsh lash of conscience hastened her steps and her reasoning.

"My father!" she murmured, grief-stricken.

That sweet and solemn word sounded to her strange and new, something quite remote.

The shepherd boy, alarmed at the sudden change, feared he had been imprudent, and murmured vaguely:

"I thought you knew all about it. Perhaps it may not be true; we can go together and inquire, you and I."

"Thank you, Rosicler; it would be better for me to go alone."

The effort the girl made to hurry on to meet new misfortunes was so evident and so pitiful that the young shepherd boy experienced a longing to share her burdens with her, but he did not know how to sustain half of the cross of that sorrow, and in order to show at least that he also was suffering, he murmured regretfully:

"I am to go overseas with Pedro; only God knows how long I will be gone."

"Poor boy!" lamented Florinda kindly, turning her glance in the direction of the sincere eyes that were following her.

Rosicler's face brightened; he gave a deep sigh, and concealed his secret longings in his heart.

So sighs the growing grain, laden with mysterious sorrows.

Don Miguel was in Astorga and it was necessary to await his return; he would be back at almost any moment.

"He has gone on business matters connected with the marriage," said Ascensión, receiving her friend affectionately.

The idea that the curate was negotiating a loan to replace the dowry overwhelmed Florinda with grief. It was the first time she had allowed herself to come into contact with the people of the town since the arrival of her cousin and the departure of her lover, and a painful shyness caused her words to come with difficulty and impeded her inquiries.

"Do you know what my father has written?" she ventured to ask.

"We know nothing."

The promptness of this reply gave Florinda to understand that Ascensión had orders not to tell what she knew concerning the matter; but evidently she was not prohibited from exaggerating the sorrows of her friend with painful suggestions; and, more through curiosity than malice, merely in order to find out matters of which she was ignorant, she asked with feminine astuteness:

"Have you good news from the Court City?"

Unable to speak, Florinda shook her head.

"Or from Valladolid?"

"No."

"Facunda Paz says you're going to be married at Christmas time."

"That is not true," protested Florinda in a weak voice.

"Oh, I thought—that as your cousin would fix up everything so smoothly for all of you——

"The fact is," continued Ascensión after a fruitless silence, "that you have all fallen into a pretty bad way: tía Dolores is losing her property just at a time when she can no longer work; Marinela has taken to her bed, and will very likely die about the time the leaves fall; the boys are running wild, while Olalla and her mother have to go out to work at whatever comes to hand."

"Go out to work—for others?" hesitantly moaned the slender thread of a contrite voice that was almost ready to break.

"Yes, they're going to work for us to-morrow."

"What are they going to do?"

"Reap the grain."

"But aren't men coming over from Galicia?"

"Some are coming to reap other rye fields where there is more work; but it's usually done here by the women; *they* offered themselves to do the work, and as they are very good help——"

It seemed to the fiancée of the poet that a slight disdain tinged the words of Ascensión, as if the downfall of the Salvadores family were now inevitable, and that this ruination swept away with it all trace of the deference she had once enjoyed in Valdecruces. The nobility of her heart and the superiority of her intelligence struggled to lift themselves rebelliously above the fortuitous destitution, yet nevertheless a delicate flush of pride dyed her forehead, and her lips remained motionless; she felt herself deserted, poor as never before, farther than ever from all the heights she had once imagined were

hers. The profound crash of her pride seemed to ring with a portent of her bondage to fatality, to silence her by its futility, scattering her hidden desires into the blackness of obscurity.

Ascensión, as if growing in stature with childish arrogance as she noted the deep discouragement of Florinda, adopted an unaccustomed tone, and began to enumerate the gifts she had received from her betrothed; she was filled with presumption, and seemed to be overjoyed by her shawls, her blouses, and her aprons, which lay scattered in profusion throughout the room.

After a time, when Don Miguel came home and invited Florinda to come up to his study, she could not conceal her affliction from his eyes; in her distress she wept copiously, sinking into the first chair against which she stumbled, deaf to the questions with which the priest plied her.

"You cannot go on living this way, Mariflor," exclaimed Don Miguel with mild severity.

Florinda replied with difficulty:

"But I long to die!"

Pacing up and down the room, the curate waited for the crisis of her grief to pass, and when it seemed as if Mariflor's tears had become exhausted and nothing but sobs and sighs remained in her breast that was heaving like the final tempests of a furious storm, the confessor drew a chair close beside her as she made an heroic endeavor to bare her soul to his questions.

Don Miguel did not deny that the sorrows that caused Florinda to weep were heavy; but it is not for a Christian girl to give way in misfortune to

sterile despair, to forget the boundless mercy of Him who regards even the sparrows, and provides for the ants, and paints the flowers, and looks upon the humblest worms.

This encouraging reminder stimulated the withering fiber of hope with miraculous power. Surely Mariflor had not forgotten those wise and loving words! As she recalled them, the recollection of her dead mother and of the lessons she had learned at her knee flooded her heart, and a rush of tenderness swept the gloomy thoughts from her mind.

A glow of the exalted pity that extends even to the ants and to the flowers, and seeks out the worms in the dust, aroused with its light all the tenderness dormant in her breast; and now in the storm of youthful passion, along with the bitterness of the fervid stream, ran deep compassion for whatever creatures might be trembling upon the verge of disaster and defeat, like birds beaten by the rain on a stormy night. Softened by the piteous current of a sorrow less harsh, Mariflor listened to what the priest was telling her.

It was not true that the news from America was as bad as Rosicler in his ignorance had understood; although Uncle Isidoro was no better, their fears regarding a fatal termination of his illness were as yet not definite, and the doctors thought that his return home might work a beneficial reaction.

As for the lad's going, his uncle considered it wise, since, as Isidoro was unable to work, Martín needed in the store the assistance of a person he could trust. Pedro was a mere boy. What of that? Others had emigrated even younger; and it is necessary to ac-

custom oneself to the struggle of this existence and to begin to prepare for it as early as possible.

Neither was it a new misfortune that Ramona and Olalla were working for a daily wage. What difference does it make whether one cultivates his own furrow or that of his neighbor, since it demands the same amount of labor, since it is irrigated from the same fountain-head, and the harvest it brings forth has the flavor of black bread from a single field. A slight sacrifice of pride is a thing so puerile when one stops to consider that all the lands we own border upon the cemetery!

In his desire to console Mariflor, Don Miguel resorted to considerations of ultra-human philosophy; but behind his grave words the tragedy of the bleak steppe sobbed with such impetus that it stood forth revealed—the vision of the sterile lands fertilized at the cost of the unceasing effort of the women mingling with the soil to which all must descend at last, blossoming with crosses and with names.

Her heart throbbed with anxieties so human, she had been so attracted by the superficialities of life and by her eagerness for transitory happiness, that her poor soul was wrung by martyrdom and remorse, while she seemed to stand mad with grief on the dim borderland between the cemetery and the harvest field.

Nevertheless, as one passes along the gray road that marks the boundary between the meadows and the tombs one must ever be on guard. What did the heir of Uncle Cristóbal say? Would he snatch the estate away from the Salvadores family? Would he be merciful?

Yes; for although Florinda had not expected it, it was true that Tirso had presented himself spontaneously to Don Miguel to tell him that he would put off the payments due on the money loaned to tía Dolores until Christmas.

"Until Christmas! How strange that is! Could Antonio have spoken to him?"

The priest made no reply to this question; but from his vague phrases Florinda gathered that she had not guessed amiss. Then a daring thought comforted her: with Tirso Paz willing to help the family out until Christmas, this would be an advantage to all concerned; besides, in five months many things might happen!

Instantly the recollection of the most urgent of the debts owing by the family leaped into her mind; could Antonio have paid the four thousand pesetas due the priest? Florinda, with painful timidity, tried to reassure herself concerning this point, but the priest interrupted her with his persuasive words.

"You owe me nothing," he murmured. "Not a cent; Antonio understands that perfectly well."

"But the time for the marriage is drawing near."

"I have the pesetas right here in my pocket."

As the girl seemed to doubt it, Don Miguel drew out a roll of bills he was carrying in his pocket above his heart, and he very slowly counted out the interesting sum.

Even yet Florinda's forehead did not clear; the cloud that darkened it persisted, because the achievement of getting that money together surely must have cost the curate a sacrifice, a humiliation, perhaps a desperate struggle. But the benefactor denied

this with a smile. And suppose somebody had presented it to him? There was no need to worry!

"You said some time ago that it was almost impossible for a poor person to borrow such a sum," suggested Mariflor, overcome with grief.

"I frequently find myself mistaken, and you are borrowing altogether too much trouble; you're injuring your health by tormenting yourself like this; we have quite enough to worry about with poor Marinela in the condition she is. So come, my daughter, try to get some enjoyment out of life, and continue to have hope!"

"In whom?" exclaimed the girl in despair.

"Do you ask me that?"

"Oh, yes; I know; in God alone!"

The uncertainty to which her eager lips gave expression revealed itself in a gesture of profound weariness. Poisoned by the vicissitudes of destiny, Florinda felt very far from the assistance of God, who was so high, up there in His heaven, in that unapproachable realm, and the deserts of neglect and oblivion on this earth were so difficult to cross. Longings for an unattainable felicity grew with such ardent fervor in her brimming heart that all other forms of sympathy and tenderness gave way beneath the explosive force of a single desire.

Audaciously, without scruples and without a flush, with the absolute need of grasping a line of hope in order that she might live, she asked:

"Have you heard nothing, nothing from *him?*"

"Not a word!" replied the curate in an indefinable tone filled with both pity and accusation. He noticed at once that his reply penetrated like a

dagger, and he saw the girl turn pale and rise against the cutting edge of his negative answer.

A violent spasm stirred Mariflor's youthful form, sorrow fixed a frozen smile upon her lips, and in her eyes trembled a glimmer of madness.

The convulsion of that poor life, and the danger to her tortured mind, demanded an efficacious remedy; but, seeking it with compassionate solicitude, Don Miguel found nothing but harsh realties which contributed to the melting of the streams of kindness constricted in her heart.

"Your father has written to you," he announced, pretending not to see or to understand her suffering. "Here is the letter."

As Florinda did not extend her hand toward the missive, but continued hesitating on the tragic borders of dementia and despair, the curate added:

"Your father is suffering and struggling for your sake; you must do all you can to comfort him."

"Oh, my father!" she exclaimed, as if it were an echo of distant caresses and old-time words.

"Yes; your father, who lives with no other purpose in life than to return to see you. And, listen! Marinela will soon die unless you take good care of her."

"She will die?"

"Naturally; nobody is paying the slightest attention to her!"

"Holy Virgin!"

Then the priest knew that the soul of Florinda would resist succumbing to grief; he had watched her drag herself on toward defeat, fascinated by the abyss of grief, and then turn in submission to the

call of duty; he had seen her courage wane and then glow again, like a freshly lighted flame combated by the wind. He waited for her, sought her, and with deep emotion was a witness of the arduous conflict of sentiments.

With the circumspection of the most intimate sorrows the unhappy girl remained silent, and in the end the curate was left in ignorance concerning what intentions had triumphed in her conscience. She took her leave of him like one in a daze, carrying her father's letter in her hand.

The sunset glow was fading, and night was descending upon the plain; it seemed to Florinda that silence was falling over the village like a veil of darkness.

A group of boys was playing at seesaw on the square, but they teetered up and down on the ends of the plank without speaking a word or making a sound, and drop by drop the fountain was pouring forth its secret in a tender song.

Florinda found the poor home silent and gloomy, as was all Valdecruces. She stepped in, overcome by anguish, but after accustoming herself to the dismal atmosphere she realized that the silence was pierced by the sound of weeping, by tears falling just as the drops fell from the fountain in the square; it was the humble echo of Marinela's sighing. At the sacred call of this sorrow, Mariflor felt an awakening in every fiber of her soul, and she hurried toward the room from which came the gentle lamentation.

"You are all alone!" she said tenderly, giving to

her words a profound intonation of sympathy and affection.

"Oh, is it you?" replied the sick girl with as much courage as she could force into her weakened voice.

In the embrace in which the two cousins united under cover of the darkness there was the sweet solemnity of a reconciliation.

"Where is grandmother? And where are the boys?" Florinda asked, as if just returning from a long journey, but without the courage to inquire for the slaves of the harvest field.

"Grandmother is somewhere about; and so are the boys, too; they are happy because they're going to have a vacation to-morrow."

"And you, are you not better?"

"On the contrary; but now they say that the witch can cure as well as do evil, and that perhaps she can make me well."

"Tía Gertrudis?"

"Of course! If she cast her spell on me, let her take it away."

"You used not to believe such nonsense," protested Florinda.

Then she shuddered as she realized that she, too, had believed in it; and when? A dizzy succession of ideas perturbed her mind.

"When?" she repeated to herself. "In some other life? In her dreams?"

No; that very afternoon, laboring under the sinister reality of her misfortunes.

Fearful of giving way to the tortures of her grief, Florinda tried to fix her mind upon other emotions that troubled her heart. She lighted the candle

and sought in the face of the sick girl lying in the poverty-stricken room the tangible drama of their daily life. She needed to place her hands on the palpitating sorrow, on the feverish and lacerated flesh; she needed to listen to weeping and crying, to feel repugnance and fear, until the secret despair of an intoxication of bitterness had been stifled.

She accomplished it to a certain extent. Marinela, very white, very thin, unable to withstand the glare of the light, dropped the livid veil of her eyelids over her pupils and smiled, revealing her regular teeth, now turned somewhat yellow. Her childish face was transfigured beneath the harsh crown of her uncombed and tangled hair; and an indefinable mixture of joy and despair lent a singular expression to her gentle features. The couch, disordered and sunken, resembled a broken boat, in which the doomed passenger was slowly rowing toward the sinister shore. From the corners of the room emerged shadows and noxious effluvia, and when Florinda held up the candle to take in all the visible sorrows in a single glance, its light fell upon an image of Christ dying on the cross.

"If it isn't the witch, then who is it that persecutes us?" stammered Marinela, noticing the reproach in the face of her cousin. But Florinda, fascinated by the dim crucifix that appeared to her as an emblem of the most sublime sorrow, asked in her turn:

"Has that image been there all the time?"

"Yes, it has."

"I never saw it before."

Beneath the girl's bodice a paper began to

crumple, crushed, perhaps, by the wild tumult of the quickening emotions of her heart. She set the light on the floor and impatiently unfolded her father's letter. On her knees, in order to throw more light on the pages, she found in the tender lines the confirmation of all that Don Miguel had told her; but he added to this some revelations that enveloped her still further in the fatal nightmare of her marriage to Antonio.

Her absent father, full of tender affection and anxiety, treated Mariflor as a child; he wished to leave her entirely at liberty to choose a husband, and yet he illy concealed his fears that she would not succeed in doing so with serenity. In the advice which he sent her the old hope of the marriage to her cousin unconsciously stood revealed. "He is good and honorable, a fine business man; the assistance which his money could give us would be splendid for all of us under these circumstances." Señor Martín had written this without as yet knowing the critical situation of his mother.

Then, in reply to the confidence made by the girl, fear of a possible disappointment inspired the words.

"These people of the pen," he repeated like an echo of the opinions of all the Maragatos, "do not inspire me with confidence; they are usually roving men, imaginative and vain, very artificial, and lacking in property; in fine, my daughter, take counsel with the priest very frequently, and may God help us all."

Throughout the whole letter a note of regret and alarm startled the reader; her father lamented that he was unable to send any ready cash, that he did

not have the money with which to pay Pedro's fare to South America, nor to make possible Isidoro's return to Spain; and the clouded brow of the girl bent in despair over the letter, as if vanquished by the oppression of another new responsibility.

While Florinda was reading, Marinela gradually became accustomed to the dim light on the floor and slowly raised her eyelids. The profile of her cousin, traced by the shadows with gigantic outlines, filled the room and touched the ceiling.

The sick girl smiled, happy to find the graceful figure of her dreams diffused as though by a miracle throughout the whole wretched room, and she rolled over to the edge of the bed in order to see her in reality. But she gave a sudden start when she saw the letter between the trembling fingers of Mariflor. Could it be from the outsider? It did not look as if it were written in verse—but what if it were from *him?*

All the perturbation and incoherent longings which were consuming the girl in a strange passion crowded to her colorless lips to stammer this question. The eager words were about to gush forth like a broken stream of uncertainties when, at the verge of the spoken word, suddenly the child's silent emotions took alarm. She had so learned to conceal them during the time when she was living shut up with her unrecognized grief that shadows and fears had formed roundabout her thoughts, and now the instinctive reserve of her soul circumspectly closed upon her own timidity and confusion. As Florinda raised her eyes, obedient to the penetrating inquiry of the other glance, Marinela saw as in a mirror the

disaster impending upon that beautiful life, and she extended her arms in a charitable impulse of consolation. Slender and pitiful was the hope offered by such fragile oars from the little bark of pain, but, rising firmly to her feet, Florinda sank within them with gratitude; she submitted to their embrace, experiencing a sense of support in the wreck of her happiness.

"Who is it that pursues us?" demanded Marinela again between her sobs; and as her cousin did not reply she added: "The witch is also a soothsayer, a seer, you understand? Let us ask her to help us!"

Florinda freed herself from the arms of the sick girl, and, pointing to the image of Christ on the wall, murmured as if inspired:

"No; let us ask Him!"

CHAPTER XVIII

HEROIC HUMILITY

FLUNG like two shipwrecked beings into the rigors of fate, Olalla and Ramona reaped their grain and that of their neighbors, binding it into sheaves and bundles, using the harrow in threshing it, wielding the winnowing fork and the *calomón*.

No task was too arduous to be rejected by these silent, sturdy, imperturbable women in their hour of need. If, overcome by the heat, or exhausted by her efforts, Olalla would falter for a moment, her mother would spur and goad her on with piercing cries, stinging as whiplashes.

"Hurry up!" she would stammer hoarsely.

And the girl, under the violent spur of this ferocious war cry, would stiffen her muscles and goad her will as a veteran toiler of the fields. With such good propensities as this, the two women never lacked opportunity to earn a day's wage when their own work would permit them to accept it; and the neglected home was still afloat, in tow of the valiant rowers.

Mariflor seconded these tasks with earnest solicitude; her own sorrow, reconcentrated and imprisoned, lay in the depths of her youthful soul burdened with chains and making no protest.

But in the courage with which the girl rose above

her own misfortunes and stood facing life, palpitated the human intention of outwitting destiny by force of abnegation. The tumult of her desolation having subsided, the whirlwind of her thoughts having grown calm, Florinda had fixed her eyes on God with supreme hope; she endeavored to win from the redeeming Christ, in memory of His exalted martyrdom, a revocation of the sentence that confined her in Valdecruces, without love and without bread, beneath the cruel dilemma of a repugnant marriage or of implacable and revolting poverty.

She still trusted in the man she loved, she still defended him against the accusations of reality. The cold silence that pursued her with presumptions of desertion she explained to herself as a punishment for her resistance and delay in turning to the open arms of the Cross.

Exigent with her own self, eager to purify herself by the sifting of all the virtues in order to deserve divine compassion, she accused herself of not having been sympathetic enough, of not having thrust aside aversions and repugnances with a firm will; she wished now to elevate her sacrifices to the height of her desires, and she debated with herself in mighty struggles because no sorrow seemed to her sufficiently harsh and refining to gain the crest pictured in her dreams; and her native sensibilities developed to such a point that she now feared even to peep into the garden lest she might interrupt the singing of the birds, and she lifted the brambles from her pathway in order not to wound them with her feet.

Under the influence of such exaggerated and somewhat unhealthy and delirious compassion, her

grandmother's poor little house acquired an appearance of neatness, almost of livableness. Florinda accomplished miracles of order and skill; the boys were cleaner and happier; the furniture was dusted and carefully arranged, and even the old woman herself brightened up and became less dull and oppressed. Above all, it was Marinela who most plentifully profited by this tenderness that invaded the home like the gentle ebbing of a devastating tidal wave.

In order to bring in the doctor, after satisfying the long-standing account, Florinda searched through her trunk, and as a result of many painful secret negotiations, obtained from the niece of the curate the precise sum needed in exchange for a few trinkets which caught the girl's fancy.

Florinda herself made the journey to Piedralbina with the seven pesetas, and with much solemnity the next afternoon the doctor called at the house of tía Dolores, after having fastened to the limb of a willow tree outside the little garden the reins of a horse similar to the one ridden by Fabián Alonso.

The doctor, youthful, forceless, and taciturn, seemed to stand as much in need of assistance as he was little given to offering it. He began by complaining about the darkness of the alcove to which Florinda led him, and ended by saying that he would examine the patient when he had sufficient light and air in which to do so.

"The house is big," he shouted angrily; "can't you find anything better than a dark rat hole for this poor child to lie in?"

The old grandmother crossed herself, filled with

amazement. To the deuce with the little new doctor! The alcove dark, after she had bought one of the finest of candles in expectation of his visit!

Florinda felt greatly ashamed, for the very reason that the justice of this censure of the conditions of the room was so evident, and she promised to move Marinela at once into the best room in the house.

Somewhat mollified, the doctor counted the girl's pulse, looked at her eyes and at her tongue, and asked about the antecedents of her progenitors, and after the old woman, with the assistance of Mariflor, had made a difficult relation of premature deaths, he recommended for the invalid wholesome food, a tonic from the drug store, and progressive sun baths.

He took his leave, marveling at the intelligence and interest with which Florinda listened to him, giving signs of understanding him, and when he came back at the end of two days, he found Marinela's bed in the middle of the sala, with plenty of air and light.

It had cost no little effort to get her up there; they looked upon one who should propose such a thing as being insane, and only by force of obstinate persistence was the merciful intention finally carried through.

"A cot in the sala? *Válgame Dios!* I never heard of such a thing!" the grandmother had replied when Florinda first made the suggestion; and the idea produced the same amazement in the minds of the other women.

After the valorous nurse had exhausted all of her convincing arguments, Olalla began to show indecision.

"If it is necessary," she began.

Ramona, with her habitual air like a dull animal, shrugged her shoulders in an indefinable gesture; and Marinela comforted her body with the warmth of the sun and the fresh air, while tía Dolores crossed herself continuously.

In order to acquire the wholesome food, and to bring the tonic from Astorga, bitter need came to the assistance on one side and avarice on that of the other, and resulted in secret negotiations between Mariflor's trunk and the wardrobe of the little teacher.

On her knees, bending disconsolately over the spoils of her happier days, the poor girl searched again and again for something she might exchange for money; and gradually, after much deliberation, her dainty undergarments, her coral rosary, her leather handbag, her ribbons, and ladylike decorations disappeared, to brighten the trousseau of the prospective bride. As they were all trifles of little value, Florinda timidly left the naming of the price to the generosity of Ascensión; and Ascensión, not over-scrupulous, influenced by the mercenary spirit of the race, regularly took advantage of her urgent need, and finally she came into almost entire possession of the humble treasures that had belonged to her friend. Nothing remained now except her mother's gold watch; it was small and dainty, having a single case.

Kneeling on the floor before the empty chest, the girl was gazing at her treasure in extreme perplexity. She would have been glad not to feel an intimate attachment for it, not to thrill with profound

emotion when she looked at the hands which were stopped at three o'clock, in memory of a tragic hour.

Several times that same day the red case had emerged from its hiding place, had been carried toward the door, and then brought back again by a tremulous hand; Florinda wished to offer it to Ascensión and to smile bravely as she made this new sacrifice; but before her tear-clouded eyes the hand of the watch trembled like a convulsive finger pointing with infinite sorrow toward a gentle memory which was about to become extinguished.

In vain the girl called upon her firm determination of subjecting herself with efficacious fortitude to the purging of sorrow; in the silky skein of her eyelashes human sentiment wove a mist between her soul and the cross.

Marinela had improved slightly. Very early, after the break of day, she would bathe her weakened chest in the miraculous rays of the sun. The comforting tonic and the food, sometimes even made to be appetizing, had begun to give her strength; in the afternoon when it began to grow warm, she would leave her bed and go out upon the balcony, drinking in continuously the tonic of the pure breezes.

The doctor had ordered that she must sleep with the window open and alone; but she, as well as her sister, looked upon the night air as an ambushed enemy, and in order to inspire her with courage Florinda placed her mattress beside her cot; both girls lay in the open air, in the moonlight, to the

stupefaction of whatever neighbors heard of this new system of healing.

Ramona looked upon all this with ever-increasing annoyance; in the beginning she had wished to offer resistance, but Florinda's pleading had for some time been working miracles with this strange woman. When the girl would approach her to ask permission regarding something, she would restrain a harsh movement, conceal the severity of her glance, and say: "Well, all right," shrugging her shoulders with her accustomed indifference. No doubt she recalled the warning she had received from Don Miguel: "Florinda has no mother; do not forget that!"

Ever since Florinda, with humble abnegation, had occupied herself with the affairs of the home and the children, and especially with Marinela, it seemed as if Ramona's passive tolerance toward all that proceeded from Florinda had become accentuated. She did not ask whence came the money and the enthusiasm for indulging her cousin; she vaguely imagined that the curate was assisting her through compassion, and she pretended, as did Olalla, not to understand it, both of them being somewhat confused between lack of curiosity, vanity, and gratitude.

To-day Florinda approached quite boldly to confront the colorless glance of Marinela's mother; it was necessary to purchase a new bottle of medicine that would cost five pesetas. She imparted the information promptly, hurriedly, in order not to be too much subdued by her timidity.

"Five pesetas!" stammered Ramona.

Her hoarse voice rolled out gloomily, with no modulation or inflection.

"Evil arts have brought this upon the lass," she hissed, "and to depend upon city inventions to cure the child is worse yet! Giving her stuff from the drug store, and every sort of fricassee, getting her used to all kinds of weather, lying exposed to the inclemency of the heavens at every hour of the day and night, certainly isn't going to cast off the spell of the witch!"

"You must not believe in witchcraft!" urged Mariflor timidly.

But Ramona, thoroughly aroused, argued:

"Do you expect me to believe that it is God that makes my husband and my children get sick, that snatches away all my property and sends me out to work in the fields like a slave? I have not deserved all that! God is just, and He can not consent to having some be mere hangers-on, while others are struggling with all their might against the tribulations of this life!"

Florinda turned pale, believing the hint to be aimed at herself, as had happened more than once before, but, turning and looking her in the face with unaccustomed kindness, the woman tempered the harshness of her voice as much as possible, and added:

"You are a youngster without gall, and you don't know anything about the devil and his works."

Catching at the kindly intent concealed in the sympathetic phrase, Mariflor ventured to penetrate the expression in the yielding eyes of Ramona, and she thought she could hear the breaking up of

the ice in the woman's heart, and the gentle rippling of a stream of tenderness concealed within it.

The four women of the house were sitting around the table after supper. The boys had been given permission to run out of doors in the cool night for a little while, and they seemed to be held in their places by an involuntary lassitude.

Weariness and sorrow stood revealed in the utter dejection of their attitudes and in their diffidence and the terseness of their words; smoke from the hearth enveloped them, and they had given way to profound melancholy.

The old grandmother opened her toothless mouth in a profound yawn, and the gentle voice of Florinda persisted:

"Marinela will get well if we go on taking care of her."

Ramona interrupted harshly:

"She won't get well unless the witch breaks the spell!"

"But she is a great deal better! Isn't she, Olalla?"

Olalla shuddered, as if recovering from a swoon or waking from a dream. Florinda was compelled to repeat the question and to explain the subject of the conversation; only then did she say with vague uncertainty:

"The witch might be able to make her well."

"For goodness' sake! Poor old tía Gertrudis isn't a witch. Have you come to suspect her too?"

Olalla shrugged her shoulders, just as her mother was accustomed to doing. It seemed as if sensations of delicacy were no longer familiar to the girl, as if

along with her muscles and her will power, her heart had become hardened as she had stood gasping and breathless, bending over the grain.

Ramona snuffed the candle impatiently, gathered the bread crumbs into a heap on the table, and, unable longer to restrain the impetus of indignation that obliged her to move, she exclaimed:

"So tía Gertrudis is not a witch? How is it that you are suffering yourself from the evil spell brought by her visit, if she has nothing to do with the sickness of so many other people? Who brought that buffoon of a stranger here, and made you fall in love with him? Who muddled you so that you won't have anything to do with an admirer as elegant as Antonio? Oh, lass, do what you will for Marinela, and see what it all amounts to, unless you change these notions of yours that are an injury to every one of us!"

Ramona was not accustomed to making such long discourses; and her angry voice held a note of desperation when she added:

"I know well enough what is the matter with Marinela; that is why I run away when I hear her bleating like a little lamb, with that fear in her eyes and that dryness in her mouth; I would have asked the Lord for her cure by means of a Mass; but God, though He is so compassionate at times, allows Lucifer to conjure against the poor little lass, my own tiny little baby!"

The crude lament became a sob, and the mother bowed her head over the edge of the table; a few tears fell upon the crumbs of bread.

"Don't cry!" murmured Florinda, touched to the

heart by compassion. "Don't cry! God won't let the devil harm His own; I am sure of that; I have learned it in sermons and in books; Don Miguel says so, too."

Ramona shook her head with incredulity, repressing her tears.

"And who is going to get hold of the money for the medicines?" she said at last, as if considering herself vanquished. Her enigmatic eyes rested upon Florinda with uneasiness, and she flushed, overcome by emotion, thinking of her little watch, and said:

"I will try to secure enough for a few days; but now I have exhausted my—my—means of obtaining it."

The woman sighed in relief, with no display of lack of confidence, of admiration, or curiosity; she dried her eyes with the corner of her apron, and, communicative as never before, said:

"The Fidalgo women are going to Astorga to-morrow, and as we have no saddle animals I had been thinking that Olalla might go along with them to sell some pigeons; they will keep her company and lend her a mount, and it will give her a chance to buy shoes for the boys so they won't have to be ashamed on the day of the feast; but we have both been offered a day's work."

"I will go," Mariflor hastened to say, inspired by a double plan.

This question having been settled to the satisfaction of all, Ramona was moved to shout to her daughter.

"Are you sleeping, or are you stupefied?" she demanded briskly.

"I'm tired," lamented the unhappy girl dispiritedly.

"Poor thing!" said Florinda, with a note of tenderness in her voice.

A great spotted cat turned toward the table and began to mew with feline eloquence.

The wearied image of Olalla remained fixed in Mariflor's mind like a poignant regret; she herself ought to be going out into the fields working without respite, earning her daily wage, the same as her cousin was doing!

Even in the quiet hours in which sleep took possession of her existence and subjected her to its pleasant dominion, the girl's sorrows were on the alert, concealed in the shadows of repose, only to rise more cruel and relentless in the light of reality when she awoke.

She had fortified her spirit against suffering to such an extent that, after overcoming her cowardly longing to die, she hurled herself into suffering, all enthusiasm for heroism. Converted into a washerwoman or a gardener, the fastidious city girl ate the food of the house with no apparent effort, presented a stout front to the vicissitudes of poverty, and felt reproach that she had not rendered her tribute of sweat to the soil; and yet the certainty of withering while still stretched upon the rack caused her terror; already she thought she could detect an impairment of her beauty, the trace of the invisible claw of sacrifice causing her features to assume a sunken appearance, making them less firm, dimming their youthful radiance. She even imagined that her hair

was fading and becoming crisp, and that it would soon turn gray.

As she was unable to assuage her suffering even while she slept, some mornings she would awake still under the influence of her restless dreams, imagining herself already faded and wrinkled like so many of the other unfortunate women of Valdecruces.

This morning an invincible sense of anxiety urged her toward the mirror; however, between the blurred patches in the glass, the beauty of her twenty summers glowed with such promise that she could not repress a smile. She approached the mirror where her image was reflected, anxiously studying the outlines of her face, and saw that her delicate skin was slightly browned by the sun; tears had formed dark circles around her eyes; but her mouth was grave and sweet; the sorrow revealed in her eyes was tender and noble, her entire countenance was embellished by suffering and gentleness.

In tía Dolores' spotted mirror trembled the radiance of a grateful glance, which, as it turned away again, discovered Marinela with her eyes fastened upon the crucifix, which had now become the afflicted girl's inseparable companion.

Florinda, overcome with shame at the contrast offered by her own frivolous inspection and that of the other girl, approached her cousin, hid her face between her arms to conceal the flush, and asked:

"Were you praying?"

"Yes."

"For whom?"

"For you."

"May God repay you!"

Marinela gently stroked Mariflor's hair, while she suddenly asked:

"Have I any gray hairs?"

"Mercy, child! Gray hairs at your age? Your hair is so long and so glossy it's a pleasure to feel it."

"Did you know that I'm going to Astorga to sell the pigeons?" asked Florinda, rising to her feet to finish dressing.

"You? But how?"

"You were asleep last night when we planned it; Olalla and your mother have work for the day, so I'm going instead."

"And who will take care of me?"

"Grandmother."

"Oh, but she don't want me to bathe my chest in the sunshine; and she does nothing but sleep when she's not scolding or crying!"

"I'll be back about dark. I'll bring you the medicine and some candied yelks just for yourself; they are very nourishing."

"But do you know the way?"

"I'm going with the Fidalgos."

"Then you will see the Poor Clares; you lucky girl!"

"Do you feel the call again?"

"Again?" repeated Marinela, flushing like a rose.

"I thought that you had forgotten all about the idea of entering the convent."

"Oh, I'm still thinking about it, yes," murmured Marinela with such an air of determination that Mariflor glanced at her in surprise; she saw that she was making an effort to restrain her tears; she

drew near to console her, and the unspoken sorrow of the girl's wounded breast manifested itself in a crisis of weeping.

"But what's the matter? What are you crying about? Tell me your trouble!"

The unhappy girl made no reply; the tears continued streaming down her cheeks, and Olalla came in and surprised the two cousins in a sorrowful embrace.

"Does the parting hurt you so much?" she exclaimed in amazement. Then she added, without waiting for a reply:

"Here are the pigeons; ten pairs."

She placed on the bed a small hamper in which the captive birds were fluttering about in alarm.

Florinda caressed Marinela, who made an effort to calm herself, and soon afterward she was left alone before the open door of the balcony, while her eyes, still dim with tears, would glance first at the crucifix and then at the resplendent clouds in the sky.

CHAPTER XIX

THE TORTURE OF HER DREAMS

FLORINDA, after receiving a pleasant welcome from the travelers, was given a seat in Ascensión's broad side-saddle, while her mother made a place for the pigeons on her mule, promising to sell them herself, since she was more expert at business of this nature than the city girl.

"You, in exchange," she said, "can go with Ascensión to make the purchases and the visits, for the wedding day is drawing near and we must not forget any of the errands nor fail to invite those who are to come."

The sky, heavily tinged with red, announced a sultry day, and the Amazons planned to reach the city before the heat should become too great, and to return to Valdecruces in the coolness of the afternoon.

Ascensión rode along talking with great enthusiasm about the gifts she had received and those which she still expected: embroidered scarfs, silk stockings, linens and quilts, rings, pendants, and collars; the only thing she needed now was a watch!

Florinda felt a sudden start on the side of her heart where she was carrying, concealed, her mother's jewel. She had made up her mind to sell

the watch in Astorga in order to spare herself the sorrow of seeing it in the hands of others, and the humiliation of continuing to ask small favors from people whom she knew. But suddenly it occurred to her that she ought to make Ascensión a wedding gift, a present that would be an expression of her gratitude to Don Miguel, and the desire intimated by Ascensión seemed to her a providential warning against her intention of concealing the precious jewel from the little teacher. She feared that there was but slight generosity in her intent; she recalled with sorrow her trunk emptied into the chest of her friend in exchange for a meager sum; but that friend had once been sweet and kind to Mariflor, she had received her into the pueblo in triumph, overwhelming her with attentions, granting her homage which until her coming she alone had enjoyed; and now she was taking her to town; her arms were gently wound about her waist; she was smiling upon her in trust and confidence, even if she were somewhat carried away by the glowing prospect of her future.

Realizing that in the house of her grandmother no beautiful gift for the bride was to be found, Florinda had begun to yield to the generous impulse of offering her the watch, when instantly she was confronted by the question: in that case, how could she buy the medicines and foods needed by Marinela?

It seemed to her better to sell the watch and add the money resulting to that acquired from the sale of the pigeons, and after purchasing the things needed for the invalid, to buy the shoes for the boys, and then buy a gift for the bride. She must slip

away from her before making the sale; she would go into a jewelry store—and what would she say when they asked her: "What do you wish?"

A painful stupor overcame her; she could scarcely hear Ascensión's animated chatter, though she made an effort to sustain it, but as she spoke she feared that the tones of her voice would reveal her worry and distress.

Sympathizing with her own misfortune, the generous soul of Mariflor overflowed with an immense tenderness that rose to the barren mountain ranges, ran through desert wastes and thickets, and anointed with pity the sturdy pine trees, the withered poppies, the humble weeds, everything growing along the dim border of the hoary paths.

How dreary the solitary roads were! They led across colorless pasture grounds and sheepfolds, never hearing the gentle sonnet of a fountain, or perceiving the fragrance of a flower. Florinda glanced over them dreamily; it seemed as if they were about to spill into the infinitude of the horizon, to continue running on toward fathomless eternity, without course or purpose; but she noticed that some of them, gliding along between fences and houses, merged at the outskirts into the firm boundaries of a field and then developed into straight, deep furrows, as if they were visible signs of a fervent supplication directed to God.

As she noticed these touching evidences of hope and labor, in her dejection she allowed her imagination to rove over the plains of fantasy, and encouraged herself with the hope that the reward of her martyrdom might be close at hand. Perhaps

Antonio would decide to be good and generous to their grandmother; perhaps that very afternoon the longed-for message of joy would come to Valdecruces: a letter that had been delayed by some mischance that had nothing to do with ingratitude or neglect.

By the time the morning was far advanced the Maragatan women reached the city; Ascensión's mother turned down the silent labyrinth of streets, while the girls went on to the door of the convent. They had taken an adjacent road near the miraculous hermitage of Ecce Homo; from there they had crossed the bridge over the Gerga, passed the Fuente Encalada, and made their way along the irrigating ditch leading to the convent, stopping only at the threshold of the Poor Clares.

Crossing a silent courtyard, they found two broad passageways beneath the upper stories of the great, heavy building. They passed through one of them, knocked at the *torno* with a gentle tap, and after a prolix explanation were shown to the *Reja pequeña*, a humble parlor with a narrow lattice.

The novitiate from Oviedo, a friend of Ascensión, with another nun, received the Maragatan girls. After having chatted for a few moments some gentlemen arrived asking for the abbess and soon Mother Rosario appeared, clad in her virginal robe, courteous and sweet.

Two whispering groups formed at opposite sides of the room, and Florinda, who sat somewhat apart, listened, inattentively at first, but with interest at last, to the story with which the abbess was satisfying the curiosity of the callers.

"Yes," she murmured, "in about the middle of the thirteenth century, a nun of the order of St. Clare from the convent of Salamanca, a native of Astorga, came to found the convent here. Not long after this, the very eminent and noble lord, Don Alvaro Nuñez de Trastamara, donated to the community this edifice, which at that period possessed very beautiful proportions and elegant architecture, and which, with its church and surroundings, had belonged to the illustrious knights of Alcántara."

The Mother spoke with a touching and reposeful voice, her figure rising majestically in the white folds of her clothing; she lifted her eyes, sighed, and continued:

"In former centuries kings and nobles granted so many favors to this holy community that our house could call itself a royal convent; in testimony of this honor we have preserved on the house of the chaplain a coat of arms with castles and lions, and in our archives there are bulls and documents of most honorable merit referring to the foundation."

The chattering on the other side of the room gave way under the influence of the gentle tones of the abbess.

"How wise she must be!" exclaimed the little teacher, glancing at her with admiration, while the novitiate replied proudly:

"She comes from a very long line of nobles; an ancestress of hers was a canoness of the cathedral of León."

"Really? Can women become canonesses?"

"In the land of Castile, they can."

The nun who was receiving the call broke her grave silence, arguing with much erudition:

"The noble seigniory of Villalobos enjoys, as do kings, the privilege of canonship, which once, through lack of male succession, fell to the Countess doña Inés, a forbear of our Mother."

In response to this same Mother, no doubt, a little door suddenly opened so that the callers could admire a beautiful cloister with Gothic arcades which was bathed in a soft and delicate light.

"It is the only part of the ancient building still remaining," said the abbess. "The garden is at the lower end; it all belongs to the cloister."

An exquisite perfume of roses and jasmine, the fresh breath of the mysterious garden, rose into the clear and changeless atmosphere; its light and fragrance pervaded the room; and Florinda, yielding to the unique impression, exclaimed eagerly:

"How well off poor Marinela would be here!"

Mother Rosario was still responding to the questions put by the gentlemen:

"The Trastamares and Osorios," she proceeded, "have been our most consummate protectors; to the former the community owes, besides immense grants of land, the irrigating ditch that for centuries has been flowing from the Fuente Encalada to quench our thirst; every day we ask God for the repose of the illustrious Castilian."

As if the gentleness of the evocation possessed magic power, a stream of water in the mysterious garden burst into song. The Mother attuned to it her crystalline accent in order to reply to the callers:

"Our order is one of great poverty and humility;

we fast the year round, and we wear very heavy woolen underclothing which is woven at San Justo."

The recently opened door gradually closed; the light, the aroma, and the murmur which had penetrated from the cloister became extinguished, as if they were illusions from another world, while the last words of the abbess vibrated throughout the room, which possessed an atmosphere of penitence and austerity.

An instant later the two Maragatan girls again mounted their mule at the convent gate, and turned toward the central streets of Astorga, which lay drowsing and silent, flooded with light.

Mariflor rode along, reading the signs of the stores without finding the one which she both feared and desired. When they entered the dry-goods shop on the street called "Antigua," Ascensión seated herself comfortably, hesitating an infinite number of times before choosing, and seemed disposed never to leave the place. Under the pretext of going to a drug store, Florinda managed to leave her there hesitating between clouds of linen; and once she was alone in the street, she turned at random, recommending herself to God.

Before leaving Valdecruces, in her desire to alter the rigidity of the implacable little hands that ever evoked such sorrowful recollections, Florinda had wound the tiny watch; she could feel it ticking near her heart, and its delicate throbbing brought her cruel pain.

She walked on hastily, turned a corner and then another, examining the names of the stores until she saw a few steel watches in a show window lying

among medals and necklaces. On the other side of the glass, in a wretched little store, a man of gloomy appearance received her in surprise:

"What do you want, young woman?"

A black cat lazily lifted its head, and a swarm of flies buzzed roundabout.

"I want," stammered the girl, deeply troubled, "to sell this watch."

After a lengthy examination of the watch, the merchant replied cautiously:

"How much do you want for it?"

"Sixty pesetas."

"If you'll take fifteen——"

"Oh, no!" the unhappy girl protested indignantly; and almost snatching her treasure from the man's hands, she rushed again into the hazards of the streets.

Clutching the little watch between her convulsively clenched fingers, she seemed to feel the throbbing of the metal in her blood, as if another life were becoming mingled with her own. All the force of her memories throbbed painfully in the girl's potent veins beneath that double rhythm. Maternal tenderness, joys of childhood, and cherished hopes of love blinded Florinda's gentle eyes with visions of impossible felicity.

As she walked along with hesitant step and a dazed expression on her face, the few persons she met glanced at her in curiosity. She wandered on aimlessly, repeating with mechanical obstinacy the names of the streets: la Redecilla, la Culebra, Santa Marta, Plaza del Seminario, Puerta Obispo—there she stopped, not knowing why, and she stood star-

ing at the escutcheon of an ancient and noble house. It was an ostentatious coat of arms; in a red field was a castle flanked by black towers; two golden eagles held up a scroll which said:

"I am brown, but handsome."

The girl read the device again and again while a mechanical persistence interposed like a cloud between her acts and her thoughts.

Suddenly a bevy of young ladies wearing fashionable hats, carrying parasols and fans, appeared within the massive frame of the great door. Glancing at them, Florinda recalled, as if it were a very distant epoch, her own life as a wealthy city girl, dressed in dainty garments, and giving herself an air of affectation.

As the young señoritas stepped into the street from the coolness of the doorway they began to fan themselves with ardor; then Mariflor noticed that she was almost overcome by the sultry heat, but she remained standing in her place, still reading with absurd tenacity:

"I am brown, but handsome."

Suddenly she heard her name called:

"Eh, lass, Mariflor! What are you doing there?"

The sister of Don Miguel stood waiting in amazement, staring at the girl.

She turned and stood in silent confusion for a moment, but finally managed to stammer:

"Why, I was looking for a drug store and I lost my way; Ascensión is in a dry-goods shop on Antigua Street, buying cloth."

With undisturbed calm the Maragatan woman asked:

"Do you like the escutcheon?"

"Yes."

"It was the coat of arms of a perpetual corregidor of all the province, a counsellor of the king, and so wealthy a landholder that when he died he left money for a thousand Masses a year for the repose of his soul."

"Oh!"

"And, listen; since I have had the luck to meet you here, you go up and take these pigeons to Doña Serafina as a gift from my brother."

"How is that?"

The woman explained that Doña Serafina, an Astorgan of noble lineage, was the wife of the present owner of the house, both of them excellent friends of Don Miguel, who was indebted to them for very great favors.

"We generally offer them some courtesy whenever we come to town," she said; "and so I thought I would pick out your most glossy pigeons for them on my own account; I left the mule at the inn, and here they are; but it makes me awfully out of breath to climb the stairs."

Florinda concealed her watch, took the hamper of birds, and entered the courtyard, saying to herself:

"These must be the people that have loaned Don Miguel the money to repay Ascensión's dowry!"

She was surprised at finding herself in an ancient and peaceful cloister like the one at the convent, extending around a garden. Following along this, she came upon the main stairway, and at its end an open door where she knocked.

Soon after, down the broad gallery running above the cloister, came a handsome brunette lady, quite in keeping with the motto of her coat of arms. Beneath the black curls fringing her forehead, her beautiful eyes glowed with strange effulgence.

"Were you asking for me?" she said, with a pleasant and subdued voice.

Feeling sure that she was speaking with Doña Serafina herself, she handed her the pigeons, saying they had been sent as a gift from Don Miguel Fidalgo.

The frightened birds glanced with terror in their innocent eyes from one woman to the other, and with indescribable tenderness they both felt the fluttering of those candid and timid lives in their hands.

The corridor lay in silent calm, bathed in the soft ashen light, and a rose that was peeping upon it from the garden seemed to bend beneath the weight of an idea.

Florinda also quickly bent her head to say with sudden inspiration:

"Would you, by chance, wish to buy this little watch from me?"

She held it out eagerly while her face revealed her emotion, and the lady said promptly:

"It must be a souvenir!"

"Yes, of my mother."

"What is your name?"

"Mariflor Salvadores."

"Ah, is it you!" said the lady, searching the flushing face of the girl with a gentle glance. "Wait

a moment," she added, disappearing down the gallery.

She promptly returned, and upon the watch which she handed to the girl she laid a fifty peseta note, murmuring:

"Keep your souvenir, and this for yourself, in the name of a little girl who died."

"Your daughter?"

With tear-filled eyes, the mute lips of the mother brushed Mariflor's forehead in a silent farewell.

The scene lasted but a few brief, fleeting moments.

As she found herself on the stairway once again the escutcheon, the motto, and the lady would have whirled through Florinda's imagination like fantastic visions, had not the generous bank note offered a sensation of reality. She wished to look upon it as a happy augury and to awake to presentiments of happy days to come; but she stopped short, listening to two cruel, penetrating voices that seemed as fatal as destiny.

A man servant was coming down the stairs behind the girl, and a maid who was coming up asked him:

"Do you know this girl?"

"Oh, it's a poor Maragatan girl from Valdecruces; the señora has just given her an alms."

And Florinda, with a crushed heart, lowered her head once again, humbling herself to the torture of her dreams.

CHAPTER XX

DULCINEA AT WORK IN THE FIELDS

IT was mid August; the rye fields had turned to gold, the sky was a brilliant blue. The sun scorched the plain, the breeze perfumed the air, the fountains slumbered, the reapers toiled in the fields, and Valdecruces buzzed with activity.

The men had returned to their homes; they would leisurely cross the broad highways or the narrow streets bent on outings and visits of annual commemoration; or, late in the afternoon, they would turn down the parched roads leading toward the grain fields to take a casual glance at the harvesting.

The newly arrived paisanos would usually make the excursion in small groups; they all talked in the same monotonous and friendly tone, never discussing or arguing, as if for them life held no problems, and their hearts met no disappointments.

Above their reddened cheeks and their smiling mouths, in the comforting warmth of their appeased appetites, the eyes of the good Maragatos would gaze upon Valdecruces with seraphic beatitude. They forgot the painful days of their childhood, when they had been shepherds, or farmers' boys, or scholars with their ragged knapsacks over their shoulders, always bound for Piedralbina, in hot

weather or cold, harassed by the poverty of the home. To-day they accept the display made by the town to receive them as a well-deserved tribute, and it seems to them quite proper that their wives and daughters should look up to them as the bondwoman looks up to the master, and that the boys after a timid salutation should shrink from their sight as if they were the supreme representatives of Authority and Power.

During the gorgeous week of the sacramental feast in Valdecruces only on the last day, the fifteenth, the classic *día de Agosto*, is the work in the fields suspended.

It mattered not that in each barnyard the feathers of birds denoted festive holocausts; the women exerted themselves to the utmost in order to serve the men plentifully in their homes and to reap and gather the ripened rye in the harvest fields.

As if the prod of servitude penetrated their flesh more keenly than ever, the women lent force to the mechanical impulse of their energies, exalted the passive current of their humiliations, and in absolute renunciation of all social equality, were content to remain on the outer border of life, strong, ignorant, untrained, offering to the masters, with the most primitive obsequious gestures, the pleasing vision of their children reared and content, of the table loaded down and well served, of the fields tilled and productive. As they welcomed their invited guests the appearance of things in these bright and glowing hours filled the husbands with pride.

From Astorga, from León, from other more distant cities, not a few curiosity seekers come to the

Maragatan region to attend the festivities, and they are invariably lodged in peculiar splendor in the most comfortable houses of each town. Dinner follows dinner with incredible frequency and abundance; the kitchens lose their awe-inspiring darkness, and are illuminated by branches of oak that crackle and glow like volcanoes; cows are sacrificed, as well as young lambs and suckling pigs; birds lie piled in heaps; tablecloths are never removed, and the wine jug never rests, while the rooms are clouded with smoke of cigarettes.

Over the continual feasting the Maragatan woman presides like a fairy godmother, giving her attention to everything; she serves, she rushes hither and yon; or she flees in alarm, concealing her invincible flush beneath the corner of her handkerchief. She even finds time in the afternoon to work in the fields, piling up the bundles of grain, or putting the binding straw to soak in the irrigating ditch; and she does not fail to attend the *verbena* in the evening, gotten up in her most luxurious dress, grave, silent, and ready for the dance, like one performing a professional obligation.

This August in Valdecruces, to those who came to attend the official festivities, those invited to the wedding of Ascensión Fidalgo were added; and the humble village, harassed by the heat of the plain, and facing the rude task of harvesting with only feminine arms, was shaken out of its dull routine, and surprised by the stir of pleasure.

The women of the Salvadores household were not expecting guests, nor were they providing banquets; silent in their suffering, they worked on with a

furious activity that, one stifling afternoon, drew even Mariflor into the labor of the fields.

Marinela could now be left alone; she could come down to the kitchen, go out into the yard and garden, sew, and even look after the boys a little. The doctor considered her cured; he made suggestions concerning hygiene and nourishment, and upon taking his leave he declared that this triumph was due to the excellent nursing she had received. As she gained in health and strength, the girl's mystic longings for the convent of St. Clare returned in ever-increasing measure; but her mother shrugged her shoulders; she had lost faith in the girl's recovery, or in the idea of her call.

No word came from America; in his compassion, the curate avoided the questioning eyes of Florinda, since he did not know what to reply to them, and she bore her suffering in silence, allowing herself to sink into a condition of meekness resembling this life into which she was gradually becoming absorbed.

When the women's fever for labor in the fields had reached its maximum, at the very height of the festivities, even tía Dolores went out to gather the grain and bind it into sheaves; Pedro was busily engaged discharging his duties as a farmer's boy, and Mariflor said resolutely to Olalla:

"This afternoon I'm going out to the threshing grounds with you."

"To work?"

"Of course."

Olalla did not seem to be very much surprised.

"Very well," she replied, walking out of the little

parlor where they had been sitting waiting for the time to begin work again.

"That crazy girl has gone completely daft now that it's time for Antonio to come," said Marinela, after Olalla had left the room.

Her mother, who had been dozing in her chair, lifted her face in order to say with a harsh ring in her voice:

"And how about you? Are you afraid you'll get covered with mildew if you don't talk?"

"But Mariflor ought not to go out and work at the threshing," replied the girl disconsolately.

"It's her own idea!" exclaimed Ramona with ill humor.

Olalla appeared at the door and sounded the warning that the midday rest had passed.

On their way to the harvest field the mother walked ahead with swift precipitation; Olalla and Florinda followed arm in arm.

"Isn't grandmother coming?" asked Mariflor, trying to conceal her distress.

"No; she will be kept busy piling the straw into the granary."

"And what are we to do?"

"Why, as it's all reaped now, we'll gather the grain into sheaves; do you know how?"

"No, I don't know anything about it; you'll have to show me."

Olalla straightened herself with a boastful air.

"Certainly, child; but you'll learn in a jiffy. You see, we'll go over to the Gatiñal field, where mother and I were sheaving yesterday. With the binders—that is, the stalks of the rye softened by soaking—

we bind the grain into sheaves, and then pile them up into a heap."

"And then after that, what?"

"After that, it's gathered up and loaded upon the wagons; it's taken to the threshing ground and made into great piles until it's threshed; haven't you ever seen it done?"

"No, I never have; and although my father used to tell me about it, I've forgotten."

A cloud of sorrow seemed to darken the phrase, making it tremulous. Olalla became more animated and continued:

"There's quite a good deal of work about it all; after laying out the sheaves, unbinding them and spreading them on the threshing floor, then they have to be trodden out by goats or horses that are driven round and round. Then it has to be gathered up by the *calomón*, and laid in heaps, winnowed with the fork, and riddled in the sieves."

"Oh, is that the way it is done?"

"Yes; then we portion it into six hemina measures, well cleaned of refuse and chaff, and thus we are sure of having our bread. In the meantime other women are gathering up the straw that serves as thatching, and the fines that can be used for fodder."

Mariflor recalled these lessons with profound sorrow; once they had sounded to her like a gentle parable filled with happy symbolism, but now they stung her flesh and her spirit with their warnings of poverty and servitude.

The temporary paths through the broad fields had been obliterated. The sickles, as they had reaped

the grain, had spread over the plain a warm and golden carpet that glowed in the sunshine.

A gentle gust of wind kissed the faces of the toiling women. Olalla straightened herself, glancing toward the outer boundaries of the landscape with intelligent curiosity, and announced:

"There's a light breeze blowing that helps out the winnowing on the threshing floor quite a good deal."

Then she smiled and added:

"To-day the heat is not so bad; you're lucky, lass."

Noticing that Florinda made no reply as yet, she said encouragingly:

"And maybe all of us young folks will sleep out on the straw to-night in the open."

"Oh, is that so?"

"It is the custom."

"But don't you leave it till the last day's work?"

"Sometimes; but it must be done while the men are here, and they're going away again right after the fifteenth. This is the thirteenth, and to-morrow is the wedding; so that we have to do so very soon."

They had now gained the Gatiñal field, and Mariflor, all tremulous, suddenly asked:

"Tell me, Olalla, tell me; listen; do you love Antonio?"

"Our cousin?"

"Yes; do you care for him—with love?"

"Child!"

"Answer me!"

"I don't understand you."

"Would you like to be his wife?"

"But my parents did not make a pact with his; it is you who are chosen."

"But would you be happy if he should choose you?"

A sudden emotion brightened Olalla's face; perhaps in the mysterious realm of enthusiasm the sole illusion of her entire life was glowing.

The effect of the suggestion passed like a sudden gust of wind over the gloomy placidity of the girl's face, and she stopped short, glancing at Florinda with her eyes emptied of illusions, and answered solemnly:

"We would all be happy if you would but choose him."

The afternoon slipped pleasantly on, as Olalla had foreseen. The gentle breeze from the plains of León swept tenderly over the harvest fields and lightened the winnowing forks at the threshing grounds, to the rejoicing of the threshers.

Light clouds fluttered in the firmament like harbingers of a peaceful night, and before the hour for ceasing work had struck, it was known for a certainty that the young people would eat their supper in the fields and sleep in the open, in fulfillment of a bucolic feast, celebrated always with the solemnity of a rite.

The men, both the married and the single, began to make their appearance, and with an air of benevolence took a hand in the final tasks of the afternoon. One would entertain himself by finishing off a pile of grain, another would wield the pitchfork, or manage the ropes of the *calomón*, and there were

even a few enterprising males who ventured to drive the heavily loaded wagons from the harvest field to the threshing ground. A pleasant atmosphere of fraternity reigned over the scene, and many women's faces were fanned by the breeze made by the winnowing forks.

The rest period was hilarious; the spaciousness of the fields imparted an air of freedom to the women in their treatment of the men, and they threw aside their customary attitude of respect and reserve.

The supper, abundant, besprinkled with copious draughts of wine, added a final touch, infusing sentiments of cordiality among the gathering, without, however, causing the women to fail to address their husbands by making use of the humble word, *vos*.

The city member of the Salvadores family seemed to the Maragatos a stranger; they looked at her with curiosity that ever increased as they noted her silence, her gloominess, and passivity, just at a moment when the flower of pleasure and confidence, so rare in Valdecruces, was about to burst into transitory bloom.

It was rumored that Florinda's depression had developed because of the absence of a gentleman who was known as the "writer," who had taken a fancy to the girl here in this strange land. The sorrow that was so evident was attributed also to the financial straits of the family, overcome as they were by a burden of debts that could never be liquidated.

On that day of expansiveness, every one of them, bound as they were to the Salvadores family by

ties of blood and by bonds of long-standing friendship, would have felt compassionate impulses toward their ruined relatives, whose adversities, no doubt, must be even more trying to the newcomer who had been reared in comfort, had it not been for Tirso Paz. He had spread the rumor that tía Dolores would free her estate of its mortgages when the marriage of her grandchildren, Antonio and Mariflor, should take place in December, since the prospective bridegroom was disposed to act as support to the ruined house; his recent visit to the town seemed to confirm this. It was said that he had agreed with the curate concerning the bases of a definite arrangement of his grandmother's affairs, and that Tirso figured as creditor in that tentative adjustment, which had been left for final settlement until the marriage should actually take place; but these rumors, so propitious for the well-being of the girl, seemed to be given the lie by the moodiness of her manner. The slightest possibility that Mariflor would reject a marriage that would be productive of so many benefits for herself and her relatives never occurred to their dull minds. Could she be under the spell of the witch as was the other lass? That question had been asked in Valdecruces more than once.

Now, in the midst of the festivities, the men glanced with respect at her mute face, and found it more reserved than that of any other of the women; the supreme pain which it revealed caused wonder because of its penetrating clarity, so unfamiliar in this land of gloomy sorrows.

When, to complete the merriment, the flute and

the drum made their appearance, none of the men who had been standing near Mariflor insisted upon her taking part, and she was left on the outside, alone and meditative, while every other woman was drawn into the dance.

Sluggish and obedient, many of them had little inclination to dance, wearied as they were by the struggle in the fields, their souls over-clouded by griefs, known to God alone. They gathered at the threshing floor from all the surrounding fields, as the drumming recruited the most lagging, as it had attracted the men, the youths, and the aged; they danced in capricious whirls, with gravity and decorum, each Maragato with two or more women, perhaps because emigration of the men and absence had converted this necessity into custom.

Night fell; the brilliant disk of the high full moon shone among the clouds, and its light was diffused with discreet gradations.

The drum ceased beating for a moment, and the air was rent by barbaric words intoned by a youth with a fresh voice destitute of either native ability or evil intent.

"If you wish to have ewes
Among your flock,
Keep but one ram,
And that a youthful buck.
If you wish that your house
Shall not burn down,
Clean the chimney screen of soot
Every single month."

The song was greeted by stamping of feet, accompanied by the powerful call of the Celtic war-

whoop, "Ru-jú-jú," which has been perpetuated throughout the Spanish generations; and the cadences of the *corro* and the *entradilla* languished more and more until the people exhausted themselves with dancing and were ready for sleep.

A few of the dancers began to make their way along the paths toward their homes, but the majority of the concourse sought repose around the threshing floor, which was broad and spongy like an enormous nuptial couch.

If the mothers slept upon it with their daughters it was because this was the established custom, not because it was demanded by lack of decorum among these chaste young people. To none of the husbands did it occur to watch his wife, and each one flung himself down at her side in the most impassive mood.

Ramona, who danced stiff and awkwardly until the last instant, was one of the first to seek a comfortable place and to remain motionless, perhaps overcome by sleep. She and Olalla did not fear the night air now that tradition offered them a golden couch on the ground.

Florinda lay close beside them, her limbs aching and her soul filled with longings; she could scarcely manage even to smile upon Rosicler who offered her a pillow of fragrant straw. She had made heroic efforts all the afternoon to conceal her want of skill as a novice in the field-work, and the torture from her aching muscles; and now she was alarmed by her heart pounding as if it were about to break, while her eyes were swollen with restrained tears.

She did not know how long she had been dream-

ing, enervated by weariness. She heard some one snoring not far away, and soon a woman's voice said timidly:

"Are you well, sir?"

It was tío Fabian's daughter speaking to her husband who had just come from La Coruña. He did not reply, and Florinda wearily sank back upon the straw.

Her eyes closed, and she imagined she was in the compartment on the train, sitting opposite a pair of deep blue eyes that penetrated and thrilled her to her very vitals.

So violent was the girl's perturbation that the little bundle of straw slipped from beneath her head. Seeking for the soft pillow, she sat erect and for a moment contemplated the strange sight of all those vigorous young people, who were crude and harsh even in their sleep; a son of Tirso Paz lay sleeping with his back turned toward his promised bride Maricruz; the daughter of Alonso was stretched out at the feet of her husband; tío Rosendín's daughter was lying at a distance from hers, and all of the couples, although united by sacraments and bonds, seemed to be divorced in a similar manner.

In the silent camp outspread before Florinda's vision, not another heart was enduring suffering, not another person was being kept awake through affliction, nor was any other dominated by a hope.

The shocks of rye seemed to loom almost to the clouds, between tatters of which appeared the disconsolate moon; from a distant stable came the lowing of an animal calling for its mate, and the sleepless girl drank insatiably of the sorrow of her

loneliness, more bitter now than ever, as she lay amidst the strong breathing of so many lives, and in the fragrance of the grain. Then the weight of the braids over her shoulders seemed to oppress her; in her eyes she felt the fire of passion, and on her cheeks the carmine of health. A fragrance as of kisses rose to her lips from the heart intoxicated with yearning for tenderness, and all her youthful spirit, exalted by sentiment, vibrated and burned beneath the cover of the night.

CHAPTER XXI

A BONDWOMAN I GIVE THEE

SCARCELY had the morning stars begun to shine forth in the pale sky than the drummer darted out to play *Mambrú* throughout the sleeping streets, gayly announcing the day of the wedding.

Through deference and respect to Don Miguel, and despite the fact that the groom was a widower, it was agreed to dispense with the classic charivari, and to celebrate the marriage with the solemn ceremonial which custom had converted into law. Ever since sunrise the neighbors had been making their way through the town in festive garb, to form the retinue; the men among them were well armed with firelocks and blunderbusses.

Máximo, the groom, had arrived from Gijón the evening before, making a great display of baggage, bringing the final gifts for the bride, and sweets and liquors for the wedding feast.

After the engaged couple had been to confession and had been examined in the doctrine, they parted; Ascensión shut herself up in her house, while Máximo repaired to that of his friend Fermín Crespo, a freighter in Pontevedra, the head of a family in Valdecruces.

A son of this merchant and a grandson of Uncle Cristóbal, both of them unmarried, as this condi-

tion was indispensable, had been selected because of their friendship with Máximo to be *mozos del caldo*, or attendants in the service of the groom. Facunda Paz and Olalla Salvadores were bridesmaids and also *mozas del caldo*, from which pompous title Mariflor managed to escape, notwithstanding much urging.

When the drum began to beat again, announcing the hour for breakfast, a bizarre crowd gathered at the house of Don Miguel, the flower and cream of Valdecruces and of not a few neighboring towns.

Slices of ham, turkey, partridges, trout, as well as old wine, were provided for all, with other delicacies and rare desserts in addition.

This first feast lasted until eleven o'clock in the morning, and at its close, the matron of honor, a Maragatan woman of importance, fastened to the head of the bride a heavy mantle of severe color, which fell down to her feet over the showy regional costume.

The bells began to ring, and the men followed Máximo, who was also wrapped in an enormous cape, and who pretended to go to seek the paternal benediction. After the ceremony had been simulated, since the groom had no father, they retraced their steps to the accompaniment of generous applause, and, arriving at the door of Don Miguel, they announced with a very grave accent:

"We have come to fulfill our promise."

"May it be fulfilled with all good fortune," replied Ascensión's mother.

The bride sank to her knees on the threshold and received the maternal blessing.

The retinue of men took their leave; behind them the women followed, silent, with faultless composure; the *mozos del caldo* fired heavy discharges from the blunderbusses with intent to exhaust nine arrobas of gunpowder.

In order to make a finer display the company paraded down the entire length of the street and turned into the one upon which another door of the church opened. The priest clad in his vestments stood waiting for them; indeed he had been in the church since very early, when he had administered communion to the couple. Don Miguel was pale and solemn; he had not attended the breakfast, and he begged to be excused also from the dinner, offering as a pretext that he was not feeling quite well.

The religious ceremonies began at the chancel, and the uninvited public, who had taken their positions hours before in order that they might satisfy their curiosity, crowded close. As the atrium was small, many witnesses were compelled to remain outside, and the street, resplendent with colors and with sunshine, presented a brilliant appearance. Fine handkerchiefs, silky velvets, brocades and tissues which had long lain in the bottoms of chests and trunks, had been taken out, and added their tone of color to the brilliancy of the scene.

Mariflor, weary-eyed and nervous, stirred about among the young people, her heart, under her showy apparel, overflowing with bitterness. Marinela, who was still insecure on her feet after her long illness, was clinging to her arm.

While the bride and groom were perspiring beneath the merciless covering of the cape and the

mantle, the young girls, accompanied by the clanking of castanets and the jingling of tambourines, began to sing:

"Now they have brought out for you the cross
Of silver, with which to marry you;
In the presence of the priest
Now you your word have given.
The hoops and the rings
You wear upon your hand, girl,
Are tiny chains of gold
That do enslave you."

At every movement made by the singers a fluttering of ornaments and fringes, a flash of filigree and corals, flickered in the light.

High in the tower, with no fear of the noisy concourse, the storks were training their fledglings in their first adventures through the air; the father bird was whirling round and round the young ones, with prey in his bill, inciting them to follow him. Lower down the mother was flying about them, ready to support them on her wings should they fall.

The wedding party entered the church; and when Marinela and Florinda looked about for a seat an old woman, with much solicitude, made a place for them. It proved to be tía Gertrudis, shrinking and humble, as usual. As she prayed her voice resembled a lamentation; her poverty-stricken appearance aroused compassion.

Ramona's furious glances fell like lightning flashes upon the group formed by the girls and the old woman, but they dared not venture to move; the holy sacrifice was now being celebrated, and

they fixed their attention upon the altar with reverence and devotion.

The Resurrected One seemed to Florinda more dead than ever before, with His livid, blood-stained countenance, and the diadem of thorns upon His brow; in one hand He held the cross, and in the other, which was pointing triumphantly toward heaven, some one had placed a poor little spray of artificial flowers. Florinda longed to be able to pray with fervor and confidence as of old; but a cruel pessimism enveloped her thoughts in heavy clouds, and the faded cloth roses, held up with a languishing air by the image of the Lord, gave her an almost uncontrollable desire to weep.

The flute and the drum accompanied the singing of the Mass, and the elevation of the Host was greeted by reports from the guns. When the final prayers had begun, the *mozas del caldo*, who wore green aprons, slipped out to the porch, followed by the single women, to greet the newly married couple with songs:

"Come out, matron, from the church
For we are here awaiting you
To give you our good wishes:
May you live many, many years.
Esteem her, caballero.
Well may you esteem her:
Another sought her hand before you,
But they would not grant it to him.
Esteem her, caballero,
As if she were a little cup of gold,
For now you have a dutiful wife
To serve you till you're old."

The bride and groom appeared in the parish house, perspiring, weighted down, and here Máximo separated from his wife to go off with the men to hold the "cake race."

Nevertheless, the girls, following Ascensión's feminine retinue, began to sing optimistically, with much clanking of castanets:

"Down the whole length of the street
The gallant leads his lady;
Down along the sandy street
The gallant leads his wife.
The dove has taken flight
Above the olive tree;
May you live many years
Godfather and godmother.
The dove has taken flight
Away over the fountain;
May you live many years
All of you here present.
Lay the table, mother,
With tablecloths of linen,
For here comes your daughter
With her fine new husband."

At the threshold of her door the girl found two chairs adorned with garlands, and, as if nobody could guess for whom they were intended, an opportune couplet said:

"Sit you down, godmother,
In a flowery seat;
Sit you down, matron,
In a flower-decked chair."

The two women accepted the indicated seats, Ascensión still burdened by the heavy mantle, which

from that day hence she was to wear only in case she should become widowed, at the funeral services of her consort. The young girls, ranged in two rows, sang "*El Ramo*," a composition of many changes and flourishes, and of peculiar sweetness. Nevertheless the tribute was long and depressing, and it was besprinkled with counsel and with allusions, which Ascensión received with an air of grave compunction, never raising her eyes from the floor, nor smiling at the conclusion of their song.

> "Prettier is the bride than any other,
> Handsome the groom above all men;
> May they have children by the dozens,
> And by the hundreds, mules."

Meanwhile the young men were at the threshing floor, busily engaged with the cake race; a loaf of bread shaped like a dummy, in the head of which were silver coins, had been provided by the groom.

The members of the wedding party led by the *mozos del caldo* defended it against all the runners who presented themselves: rules of tradition gave the right to acquire it. When the winner had received the prize of the coins the beheaded dummy was distributed among the gathered crowd, as a symbol converting Máximo into a citizen of Valdecruces; the assistant mayor announced the fact in a speech.

The young girls were still singing when the cake runners returned to the house of Don Miguel:

> "You are welcome, you are welcome,
> Very welcome may you be!"

A deep basket filled with bread cut into small pieces had been placed before Ascensión, and she offered one to all who approached her to say: "God's blessing upon your marriage!"

Tía Gertrudis came near also, and Ascensión, after hesitating for an instant, with extreme delicacy gave her a piece, taking care not to touch the hand offered in a courteous greeting.

A few voices were raised in protest:

"Out with the witch!"

"Don't get her stirred up!" admonished a compassionate woman. "The poor thing would starve to death if it were not for the alms given her by the *señor cura*."

"She is full of vigor; she won't die as easy as all that," muttered Ramona; while a girl standing beside her sounded the warning:

"To believe in witchcraft is a mortal sin."

When all the bread had been handed round, a great dinner was served; the classic *bizcochada*, an appetizer of sour wine, was followed by the interminable list of heavy viands which the bride and groom ate from a single plate. Finally, about mid-afternoon, at the close of the banquet, they were free at last to throw aside their dull gray wedding garments in order that they might dance together until they became exhausted.

Now the godmother made her offering. With a gold coin lying upon a costly tray, she passed before the guests, saying:

"For the beasts of burden, and to comply with custom."

They all contributed; even the Salvadores women

added their mite to the general offering in the form of a few pesetas.

Then the godmother demanded:

"For the first pair of shoes for the baby."

For this also there were offerings.

It was incumbent upon the attendants of the groom to carry the bride's household goods to her new domicile; and as Ascensión was to live in the house adjoining her mother's, this gallant obligation was fulfilled in a trice.

Then began the dance up and down the wide street, in all its gayety, extending from the parish house to the church. The strong light of the sun and the vividness of the dresses gave to the spectacle an air of brilliancy and joyousness which had been lacking in the dance at the threshing floor. Although the reserve of the women possessed the appearance of austerity, they now seemed less wearied and more content. The men, upright, arrogant, and pompous, never smiling or laying aside their gravity, wore an air of satisfaction; in the pocket flaps of their waistcoats roses lent a note of gayety between their pleated shirts and their typical jackets. Garters, ribbons, and bows fluttered in the breeze, sometimes embroidered with a fervent legend of love:

"There you have my heart
Fastened with this key;
Open it and find within
That there's only room for thee."

The dance began with the *baile corrido*, the couples turning with a slow movement, languid and

genteel, which terminated in the rhythm of the *jota*. Then followed the dance called the *dulzaina:* the women, standing in the rear, two by two, gave a turn in a circle; the maidens in the foreground, the married women behind them silent and thoughtful; the men proceeded in the same manner, on the outer side of the feminine chorus; until, at a signal from the drum, they sought partners, choosing them in strict order, two women to each man, from the first of the dancers. Next came the *entradilla*, in which the men make their appearance, dancing, and after a time the women come to seek a man; it is the dance which causes cheeks to flush while feet are stamping. The girls try to choose their nearest relatives, brothers if possible. The chorus characteristic of all weddings was composed by women who did not dance, one by one playing the castanets; the godmother led the march, the bride followed, and the unmarried girls brought up the rear behind the *mozas del caldo*. This wheel was not interrupted when the men broke through from the outer edge to dance with the women, embellishing the figures with complicated details of native flavor, and much decorum.

Down at the end of the street, beneath the harsh brilliancy of that indigo sky, the artistic diversion assumed the character of a religious rite, an aroma of fabled romance, to which the church tower with the sacred nest of the mother stork lent a mark of distinction. Soon, however, after the drummers had taken a short rest, the men went into the house to sip from the bowl on the festal table which was always spread; and while the breathless women

waited, the charm of the dance was broken, and the atmosphere of an ancient cult became converted into the vulgar smell of Rueda wine, amidst an acrid odor of perspiring humanity.

Thus the hours ran on. The small part of the audience that took no active part in the festivities began to grow weary, but no one dared to confess it; the shooting of guns continued, and the spectators still fixed their eyes with atavistic devotion upon the dance.

Don Miguel had retired to his room with the excuse of a slight indisposition, although he would not forego taking a cup of coffee with the godfather and flinging an occasional curious glance from his balcony in the direction of the dance. He saw Mariflor with her cousin clinging to her arm, both of them, with wearied and dejected countenances, leaning against the portico of the church. He would have invited them to come up but wishing to avoid the inconsolable sorrow in the depths of Marinela's eyes, he limited himself to ordering that they be given chairs.

This foresight placed the two girls in the most prominent position among the crowd, beneath the lintel of the house decorated with withering branches of black poplar, gathered with extreme difficulty.

The conspicuousness of the place caused the favored girls no little uneasiness, since it enabled the curious to stare at them with still greater satisfaction.

"Don't you suppose this will be over soon?" asked Mariflor with an air of boredom.

"Nonsense, girl; they're going to keep on dancing till dark; you'll see! Then they'll have a big supper, and after the bride and groom have gone to bed still the *mozos del caldo* must go and take them a stew of chicken giblets."

"Oh, yes; a fine custom!"

"And they eat it!"

"But you and I will go home at sunset, because the night dew will be harmful for you."

"We won't be able to sleep; the young folks will be keeping everything stirred up with their shooting, and they go about from door to door asking for fowls for the dinner the day after the wedding."

"Yes; and I heard some one say that if one doesn't give them they go and take them from the roost themselves."

"Those are the privileges belonging to the groom. To-morrow Mass will be read very early, and the relatives of the married couple take the offering to the *señor cura*."

"I didn't know about that."

"A pint of grain or a little more; after that they go through the same festivities as to-day."

"Just as solemn?"

"With fewer ceremonies; only that a *moza del caldo* dances, carrying with her the *pica*, which is divided later; it is a pie colored red."

Marinela, negligent and weary, said no more; Florinda sighed, and the afternoon began to wane. Now they were about to take their leave; they were waiting for an excuse to sneak away, when tío Fabián stopped before them, holding out a letter:

"It's for the *señor cura*," he said. "Who will take it to him?"

Mariflor with a hasty glance recognized the writing. It was from her father; and she replied:

"I will take it up to him; Don Miguel, no doubt, is in his study."

As the old man handed it to her he said:

"It would be better if I had one for you, little dove!"

The girl disappeared, making no response, and she had scarcely controlled her emotion by the time she knocked at the study door. Don Miguel was not a little surprised by the call. As usual, inside his letter came another for Mariflor; each one read eagerly, impatiently and without sitting down. Then they exchanged glances, and it was the girl who was first to speak:

"He tells me to marry Antonio."

The words rang out with indescribable bitterness.

"Probably it is a piece of advice."

"It is a request; my father is sinking into ruin and he asks me to save him."

She held out the letter, pointing with a trembling finger to the pleading lines: "My daughter; save us all, and I assure you that as a reward for your sacrifice God will make you happy."

With profound pity the priest raised his eyes to the girl's face.

"Read what he has written above that," she murmured.

"Yes, so I imagined; your cousin offers to reënforce his business with the necessary capital, but upon the condition of your marriage."

"Does he tell you that?"

"Just as he does you."

"Impossible; why, that man wants to buy me!"

"His manner of procedure should not annoy you; by it he gives you an unheard-of proof of his regard."

"But I cannot sell myself!"

"Then tell your father so frankly."

"Oh, my God!"

"Remember that you are not compelled to make the sacrifice."

"Sacrifice? My compliance would be anything but a meritorious act, now that Rogelio has deserted me."

She bowed her head and began to sob; her tears revealed the completeness of her despair.

Deeply touched, Don Miguel protested:

"Yes, yes; he who voluntarily surrenders his liberty sacrifices himself."

"But I am not free! I give you my word, *señor cura*, that I am suffering the most abject slavery. You see how he has behaved; but it does not matter; I love him, I love him! I cannot marry another—it is impossible!"

"Calm yourself, child; go in peace. I will write and tell your father all that has happened."

"Tell him that it does not depend upon myself; that I would give a thousand lives for his sake; that I am dying of sorrow to refuse him this favor!"

Tears choked her voice; the priest tried to calm her with exhortations of piety. The girl took her leave as best she could, and went out the door, saying:

"I give you so much trouble! May God reward you!"

As the shadows gradually had been deepening throughout the house, Don Miguel lighted Mariflor's way down the stairs with matches.

She went away completely discouraged; avoiding the lights of the kitchen and of the little room where Ascensión used to sit and sew, she slipped through the door, until she reached Marinela when she grasped her arm and both together they walked away under cover of the darkness.

Her grief was so evident that Marinela asked her in alarm:

"But what is the matter? Did the letter bring you bad news?"

"No, no!"

"You seem to be so troubled; you came down the stairs in such a secretive way."

"In order not to have to say good night; I don't feel just like doing so; to-morrow we'll make our excuses."

"Mother has gone home, too. Listen; how sad a wedding is, isn't it? It makes me terribly depressed, I don't know why."

Mariflor could answer only with a sigh.

CHAPTER XXII

THE HAMMERING OF THE HOURS

NOVEMBER ran on. The leaves of the dark heather and of the deciduous oaks began to turn pale before dying of autumnal fever; the sun seemed to become yellow and to draw ever farther away, until it barely gilded the austere coloring of the landscape, and fell with infinite heaviness above the noble plain of León.

One gloomy afternoon Mariflor was compelled to go to the mill, which lay two kilometers from the pueblo.

"You can't lose your way," Olalla had said, "if you just follow the trail running alongside the irrigating ditch."

Olalla was preparing to spend the day helping her mother with the washing, and Marinela, who had fallen ill again, spent her time huddled close to the fire.

Mariflor started on her journey with a little basket of rye on her arm, and her profound sorrows in her soul. She took the road leading to the flat, cold, harvest fields, so deserted that not even the flight of a bird kept her company; storks and swallows had disappeared as soon as the wind had started to sweep across the heath and the light had

begun to look pale and aged as it filtered through the clouds. The young storks, now brave and secure of wing, as they took their flight behind their parents, aroused in the breast of Florinda a wild impatience for adventure and for new horizons. Fugitive things caused her to dream and to suffer; waters, clouds, and winds produced unaccustomed longings, desires to convert herself into atoms of those fleeting currents. To-day all things round-about the girl lay motionless; silence prevailed, and she listened to the "sonorous solitude," to the falling of the seconds beneath the hammer of time, and to the onward flow of life with its wild palpitations that reëchoed in her pulse and in her heart.

Life! Why should she care for it? Her soul had bidden farewell to felicity. Mariflor was living with her eyes fixed upon all things transitory, upon that which takes its flight, and which dies; sometimes she would count the minutes with a furious desire that they should pass; she would urge them on with her thoughts; she wished to precipitate them into the abyss of eternity by the millions. Hers was not the eagerness of one who hopes; it was the morose restlessness of one who seeks death; yet, nevertheless, in the turbulent river of these anxieties a strong impulse of hope persisted.

She would not confess this to herself, and to-day she meant to take advantage of the loneliness of this path in order to destroy the letters she had received from her lover. With a quick movement she drew them from her jacket and unfolded them; there were three. She laid them together and tore them down the center as if they were a single one,

and then without stopping to take breath, hurriedly, and stifling back the tears, she rent them into tiny scraps.

The letters of the verses in the small tatters of paper seemed to rebel, and Florinda hurried on, fleeing from the rushing of her memory, that persisted in repeating:

> "I am love that passes,
> The child love that you will meet some day
> After the storms and tempests of your soul."

In spite of her determination, the girl lent ear to the impassioned echoes of the plaint. Then the lines of her face softened, and with a sudden movement of ineffable tenderness she scattered over the paramo the tiny fragments of her joy, as if they were seeds of love; some fell into the stream along the bank of which she was making her way.

There lay the souvenirs of an affection, the seeds of an illusion, trembling on the surface of the gentle waters, whispering a tale of love to the harsh clods.

The brook ran on clear and silent; threatening clouds appeared in the sky, and against the colorless horizon the profile of the mill became dimly outlined; far away in the distance the crown of a sheepfold spread around in a circle close beside the wind-swollen bed of the shepherd.

Florinda recalled her first walk into the country beyond Valdecruces and her meeting with Rosicler, the gallant shepherd lad who had now emigrated, as had the birds. For many days he had remained close to the girl, until the time came to bid her farewell. What did he say to her? Nothing! His

eyes seemed to be burdened with secrets, but he could do no more than murmur: "Good-by, good-by!" He went away with tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Poor boy!" murmured Florinda after a long, deep sigh.

Embittered by the acrid flavor of so many misfortunes, she protested against fate, and rebelled with all the impetus of her great and impassioned heart; she wished that as the wind swept over the heath it would fill the plain with wild shrieking; that the waters of the brook would turn livid; and that frightful storms would burst, bringing snow and hail. She wished to envelop the desolation of her soul in a mighty tempest, in a formidable desolation of the entire world!

As she passed the sheepfold the yearlings thrust their muzzles through the fence railing and bleated with disconsolate tenderness. The rustic swain who guarded them whiled away his time evoking winter in the languid song:

> "Ah, night of the Nativity,
> Ah, night serene and calm!"

"Good afternoon!"

"You are welcome!"

The boy's eyes followed with peculiar fascination the slender figure of Mariflor, who still seemed to be a stranger, and who possessed extraordinary charms unfamiliar to that country.

"She wears her braids uncovered!" the shepherd lad said to himself, charmed by the splendor of the girl's hair.

As she walked on she noticed how the irrigating ditch broadened in area as it approached the sluice gate opened in the canal.

The wind had begun to blow; its moaning and shouting rose above the lamentations of the fields, and the clouds gathered, writing silent lines upon the waters as they rolled onward.

There were but few people in the mill, which, due to the scarcity of water, was grinding very slowly, and the Maragatan women who had gathered looked forward to the rain as a blessing for their crops. Several towns shared the ownership of this establishment, which was driven by the waters of the Duerna, and which worked only in the winter; the women who were waiting their turns were talking as slowly and as deliberately as the mill was grinding. Now and again one of them would rise from her seat, fill the hopper with a measure of grain, then give a deep sigh and sit down again. Every little while the clapper would announce that the wheel had ceased to turn; they must wait until the water should collect again.

When Florinda, somewhat confused because of her inexperience, came to request her turn, they received her cordially; they made a place for her on the bench, and in lowered tones began to discuss the Salvadores family.

"What it used to amount to, and what it amounts to now; isn't that so?"

"Yes; and all the property they've frittered away!"

"They used to be such a proud and haughty people!"

"Naturally, since they had heaps of money!"

"And the lass is fine looking!"

After a tiresome wait Florinda was rejoiced by the sudden appearance of Maricruz, who had stopped in on her way home from Piedralbina to ask for a little water, and to seek company, if any might be found, for the rest of her journey back to Valdecruces.

"You'll find a jar full on the surbase," they told her; "and here is one of the Salvadores girls to go along with you."

Maricruz took a drink, smiled at her neighbor, and sat down to wait for her.

"What time do you suppose it can be?" asked a woman.

Another replied:

"It is hard to tell now that we can't see the sun."

The new arrival thought it was a little after three o'clock.

"It's getting frightfully cold!" they told her.

"Fairly so; and it's blowing real hard."

"It's going to snow, for sure!"

"Yes; this year we'll have snow before Christmas."

"This morning there were icicles hanging from the roofs."

"Before we know it the Duerna will be swollen, and we'll have to open the sluice gate in order to grind."

A young girl from Piedralbina announced happily that the New Year festivities were going to be very fine; and they began to discuss the custom prevailing on that day when the shepherds disguise

themselves as women in order to make a display of resistance and to become known as valorous men. Dressed in this manner they are called *xiepas*, and asking for gifts they dance on stilts in the snow, singing and going about in weird nocturnal processions which they illuminate with torches and with decorated wands like the pagans in the orgies of Bacchus.

When at last Mariflor's basket was filled with flour the girls from Valdecruces started for home.

"Hurry up," the others told them, "or else you'll be overtaken by the snow."

The first flakes already had begun to fill the air.

Maricruz wished to enliven the journey with friendly conversation and to show courtesy to the city girl. She said that she was returning from the house of the doctor where she had gone to settle his account, and she asked if it were true that the Salvadores women were expecting Uncle Isidoro.

"It seems that he has symptoms of cancer," she said compassionately.

"I don't know," Florinda replied vaguely, looking at her companion with admiration. She was a blond, sweet-faced young girl; whenever she spoke she smiled; her step was firm, her voice soft, her eyes calm; and her marriage with a son of Tirso Paz was arranged.

The water in the millpond roughened in the wind, with a deep roar; the shepherd had sought cover, and the clouds, burdened with snow and wind, obliterated the lines of the landscape.

"It's going to be a fine night for your bee!" exclaimed Maricruz, smiling.

"No one will go if it is snowing."

"They'll go all the more willingly, child; for you've got a big, roomy stable, with the floor all covered with straw. Will you give entrance to tía Gertrudis?"

"If she comes."

"Because she can tell tales about warriors and sailors that it's a joy to hear. In her younger days she used to be at the seashore, and she knew Maragatos of great learning, conquistadores who founded cities across the sea and got lots of money."

"But were there such people?"

"To be sure, lass."

"I've heard about them; I've read about them in books."

"And do you doubt it?"

"Sometimes I do."

"You don't know the people around here very well; when you settle down among us you'll see!"

"I see a great deal of poverty; the women abandoned to their tasks, the men absent, harsh."

"Harsh? I don't understand you! Valdecruces is a poverty-stricken village; but the Maragatan region is very big, and it has wealthy towns and fashionable houses. Outside of here the Maragatos who made fortunes and had the advantage of education are now great lords of much fame."

"Yes, I know."

Florinda's face wore so incredulous an expression that Maricruz, as if stung in her regional pride, continued with much warmth:

"There are books that lay many valiant deeds to

the Maragatos; the teacher at Piedralbina makes all the girls read them."

"I don't mean to say anything against these men; why, my own father was born here."

"And your grandparents, too."

"Yes, of course! I mean only the customs, the crudeness of the region. It is so unpleasant! And in the men one seems to notice it more."

"Those who don't learn fine ways may be as you say; but better workmen and more honorable you will never find anywhere. If they give their word they keep it; they maintain their families in accord with what they earn, and if any one should deceive a woman he would be disgraced for all time. It never happens!"

Mariflor gave a faint sigh, and her friend, thinking her convinced by the earnest discourse she had just pronounced, assumed an air of pride and continued:

"Then, too, there are Maragatos that figure in politics and write in the newspapers. There are military men of much valor and prominence, and clergymen of great piety."

"Yes, I know."

"When they are raised away from here they are as clever as anybody; and even the most ragged shepherds have a way of bettering themselves if they get a chance."

Now Florinda smiled in spite of herself.

"Yes, girl; don't forget that lad from Iruela who herded cattle at the foot of Teleno. The wolves ate up one of his animals, and he, afraid to meet the boss, got out of the country by way of Sanabria.

So he blundered into Extramadura and because of a revolution they sent him on to Portugal; and still from there he was exiled to England; and without understanding the talk, or knowing anybody, entered a clockmaking establishment as an apprentice; he learned the trade, and then there wasn't any other clockmaker in the whole world as famous as he."

"Yes, that was Losada; I know his history. When he returned to his native land after having been away a long time, he left a big clock in Madrid, making a present of it to a building on the Puerta del Sol."

"Do you see? Well, other shepherds from Santa Catalina, relatives of my grandmother, used to drive their sheep down to Badajoz every year to winter in the bottom lands belonging to a duke named Del Alba. It happened that, in tilling the unclaimed land not far from their hut, they found it to be fertile, and every winter when they went there with their merinos, they tilled a little more, until the great duke gave them permission to found on his lands two towns, the Antrines, the upper and the lower. Had you heard of that?"

"No, I had not."

Maricruz smiled triumphantly and trod the hard road with an air of pride. Florinda, in order to respond to the communicativeness of her companion, murmured:

"You seem to be real happy. When are you going to get married?"

"Some time this winter; the day isn't set yet," she replied with a flush. "And you at Christmas time, eh? You're getting a very manly young fel-

low. You can see for yourself that there are people of great fame here on these plains of León!"

Attributing Florinda's silence to modesty, Maricruz did not insist upon this point, and she gave another turn to the conversation:

"How the wind roars!"

"Doesn't it, though!"

Both girls stopped for a moment to listen to the furious racing of the winds, and to study with tranquil expectation the threatening blackness of the clouds. Each of them, for different reasons, remained undisturbed; Maricruz was not frightened at the storm because she was accustomed to it, nor did Mariflor consider it wild enough to be cause for alarm. She was thinking that her soul was more overclouded than the heavens, and she glanced about eagerly for a trace of the seeds of love she had scattered over the plain a short time before. But the tempestuous gusts of wind roared vigorously along the ground, and she could not find a vestige of the sentimental seeds she had scattered along the margin of the agitated brook.

When Mariflor stooped to reclaim as a souvenir something white and tiny that was rolling along, she picked up only a flake of snow, when she thought to recover the adored fragment of a letter; in her burning hand the icy flake instantly melted.

"What is it?" asked Maricruz, seeing her friend turn pale. "Are you frightened?"

"No!"

The hoarse murmur and the disturbed countenance with which she replied worried Maricruz.

A strange and painful impression disturbed her

ingenuous spirit. She gently linked her arm into that of her companion and, not knowing why, said, sympathetically:

"Is Marinela getting along all right?"

"She is just the same."

"Are you still sleeping in the open air?"

"Not now; my aunt would not allow it after the bad weather began."

"Poor little thing! And now, if her father comes home sick too!"

"I don't know whether or not he is coming!"

"You know they say that tía Gertrudis has put a curse on all of you; did you ever hear that?"

Mariflor had become somewhat more calm.

"That is not true," she protested.

"I never believed it myself; she is neither a witch nor a soothsayer. She may be, perhaps, a conjuror."

"She is nothing but a poor old woman like a lot of others."

"But she is much better than they; she knows responses, songs, and remedies that surprise one. With some thyme that grew in a little piece of ground in the garden, and some other plant that had a sweet taste, she cured me last year of a sore throat."

"They say that she is all alone in the world and very poor."

"Yes; and they have given her a bad name, and she gets very little help, although the young folks don't believe in witchcraft any longer; those are ideas of children and old women."

The snow began to fall faster; the girls, arm in arm, hastened their steps, following the bank of the

stream, a straight course leading toward Valdecruces through the gathering darkness. The mill race was left far behind, and Maricruz, guided by her rural experience, announced joyously:

"We'll be there soon now!"

But suddenly she shortened her steps, listened for a moment, and then added sorrowfully:

"Ah, tía Mariana has died!"

"Yes, they're tolling for the dead," said Florinda. "But how do you know it is for her?"

"Notice the strokes: one—two—— If it had been a man that had died there would be three."

"Ah!"

"Tío Chosco is very sick, too."

"But imagine the idea of the gravedigger himself dying!"

"The sacristan will inherit the position."

"And that tía Mariana, was she very old?"

"Yes, child; she was the grandmother of Facunda on her mother's side."

"And the grandmother of your promised husband?"

"Yes."

"Then we must pray for her soul."

The murmur of prayers issued from the lips of the two girls as they entered Valdecruces in the early twilight, just as the afternoon was sinking, prematurely darkened by the snow.

Mariflor was so deeply impressed by the thought of the tragedy that she did not feel great uneasiness when she entered the house and was greeted by the sound of weeping and moaning. It seemed to her

that the hour had come when Humanity, as well as Nature, should give way to lamentations, but the reason for this explosive outburst was revealed by a complaining voice issuing from the darkness of the little parlor:

"Oh, how late you are! Didn't you know that Pedro is going away, and that my father is coming home to die?"

Florinda did not know what to answer, and Marinela, still detaining her by grasping her arm, added with a tone of anguish:

"Mother says that we're too poor ourselves to think of giving help to a sick man, and that grandmother no longer has any property, or any house in which to offer shelter to her son; besides, we don't want to have my brother go away off there; that's why she's crying; and she says they're snatching her boy away from her, robbing her of him; grandmother does nothing but moan, and Olalla seems to be dumb."

"But who has written?"

"Your father."

"To me?"

"No; to grandmother."

"He doesn't write to me any more!"

"But there are ever so many messages for you in the letter, child."

Within the house the lamentations had begun to subside, and Mariflor continued listening to her cousin.

"You see, the letter says that some rich Maragatos are paying the fare for these journeys I'm telling you about. My father will be here by Christmas,

and Pedro must leave in the early part of the month with a man from Santa Coloma."

Marinela gave a deep sigh of anxiety, and then she began to wail:

"Oh, mercy! I am more thirsty than ever! And I have such a queer feeling in my chest, and such a weight of sorrow in my soul!"

"But you must cheer up," murmured Florinda mechanically.

"I am of no use for this world! If only I could enter the convent!"

At that instant the boys came in from school shaking off the snow and holding out their hands in the darkness in the direction of the kitchen. Behind the lads came the girls.

A low fire was burning on the hearth and the light of the candle flickered on the table. Upon seeing her son, Ramona made a savage rush at him, and began to howl as if all the mistreated and dying animals in the world had loaned her their voices:

"Oh, my son, I am being left without you! I gave you birth and I nursed you in my arms, and I worked for you like a slave! Now that you know me and love me, they are taking you away from me! Oh, my poor boy, I'll never see you any more! The seas and the men are snatching you away!"

The mother's kisses more resembled bites, so hungry were they; all the family wept, and the boy, thoroughly alarmed, could scarcely summon courage to say:

"I'll be back soon!"

"You'll come back dying just as your father is doing, and I'll be old and half blind like your grand-

mother, with no nest nor lair where I can give you shelter; the same as that poor thing; look at her!"

Restraining the explosion of sympathy in her harsh and firm accent, Ramona shoved her son toward the old woman.

She took him in her arms, bending forward in her chair to receive him, with grief as overwhelming as if at that instant the last drop of tenderness were being expressed from her aged heart.

Carmen and Tomasín, whimpering and sniffling, also took refuge in the caress. Olalla began to sob, and the disconsolate notes of the dismal concert of sighing and weeping began anew.

Ramona, with her eyes fastened upon the group formed by tía Dolores and the children, began to grow more calm, until at last, she knew not how, a sudden sense of consolation rose to her lips in a single sweet word.

"Mother!" she said.

No one replied. The girls thought she was talking to herself; but she advanced resolutely from the place where she had been standing. Her long shadow touched the ceiling and filled the kitchen with gigantic outlines.

"Mother!" she said again. In recent years, the natural severity of her disposition having become hardened by her misfortunes, she had refused to pronounce this gentle word.

"Mother!" she repeated. "Don't you hear me?"

She placed her hands on the weak shoulders of the old woman with unaccustomed gentleness.

"Oh! Were you calling me?"

"Yes. Look; all our crying won't break the evil

spell that has overtaken us, and it only makes these poor little children sad."

"What would you have, daughter?"

"I don't want you to cry; 'Sidoro must find you as young as ever."

"But, didn't you say——?"

"Yes, but I didn't really mean it; you still have health, and a house wherein to receive your son."

"Ah! Do you consent?"

"Do you suppose I'm a heretic? Is the poor lad to be left out in the middle of the street? We will struggle and strive for him like good Christian women."

"Daughter, may God reward you!"

"Yes," murmured Ramona, throwing her arms around Pedro again. "God will pay me when this boy comes back!"

Marinela was clinging tremulously to her cousin, and both of them, and Olalla, too, took courage upon hearing those last words.

"Come," ordered Ramona, turning to them with an impatient gesture, "the people will soon be here for the bee, and you must not be seen with such forlorn faces. To-morrow we'll talk things over with Don Miguel."

"A little while ago," stammered Marinela, taking advantage of so expressive and unusual a cordiality, "I saw tía Gertrudis, and she said to me——"

"Where did you see her? Was she sneaking around here?" interrupted her mother angrily.

"She was going by, carrying a bundle of fagots; it was so big it was all she could do to manage it!"

"Well, what did she say to you?"

"That she was coming to the bee to-night, because she had no light to spin by in her cabin. I didn't dare tell her not to come, for Don Miguel orders us to respect her!"

"Well, let her come in!" conceded Ramona, vacillating, glancing at Pedro with gloomy foreboding. "And now it's time for spoons and the stew kettle; come to supper, so these young ones can cuddle down to bed."

The pallid figures that composed the picture moved about noiselessly, and throughout the room vibrated only the sound of the passing bell still tolling the gloomy knell.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE COMFORTER

"OH me; oh my!"

"What's the matter, tía Gertrudis?"

"I'm tired, child."

"And aren't you going to tell that story?"

"That one about the lighthouse?"

"Yes."

"When I get rested; all day long I've been tramping over hill and dale gathering oak wood before the snow should come; and I'm all used up."

"In the meantime," then proposed Maricruz, "let's have some riddles; shall we?"

Both the young girls and the old women agreed. A slight trace of curiosity compelled them to raise their eyes and this animated their faces.

The village bee was taking place in the spacious stable which once had sheltered tía Dolores' sleek animals; a layer of straw in guise of a carpet lent color and softness to the blackened floor, and a lamp, to which all had joined in contributing oil, hanging from the ceiling beams, gave less light than offensive odor.

Here was to be found a school for every kind of woman's work: some of them, generally the old women, spun; some knit; and others sewed or crocheted baby caps and skirts. The gathering,

which was accommodated by turns in the better stables of the village, on the bare ground, under the breath of the animals, usually was brought to a close in a Christian manner with the recitation of the rosary; but before that stories were told, riddles were proposed, and even a tiny note of piquant gossip was allowed to buzz about among the distaffs and needles.

Although the stable of this poor home, now so reduced in circumstances, sheltered but few animals, it enjoyed preference in Valdecruces because of its spaciousness and its central location, and to-night it was invaded by a goodly number of feminine guests, with no other masculine company than that of tío Rosendín, the old sacristan. His daughters Felipa and Rosenda were here, too; the granddaughters of tío Fabián with their mother; Ascensión with hers; Maricruz Alonso and her sister; the Crespo women, la Chosca, and a number of others of different ages and similar circumstances.

While the guests were gathering, those who had already arrived spoke of the storm, recalling the last one, which had covered the houses with enveloping drifts, veritable mountains of snow. Felipa announced that by way of precaution she had stored up a good quantity of branches and leaves for feeding her sheep, and tío Rosendín prophesied that even though the storm might become more violent, still they would be able to feed the cattle on broom grass for two weeks. The Salvadores women asked with much concern for tío Chosco, who, according to the sacristan, was getting along very well. Then they commented upon the death of tía Mariana,

regretting that the Paz family could not attend the bee.

"Probably they are holding the wake over their grandmother's body," suggested some of the women; and others exclaimed compassionately: "*Biendichosa!*"

But when all had gathered who were to be expected to-night a demand was made for riddles, and the person who made the request initiated the first one:

"In the church I am,
Among old irons lying,
Swaying this side, swaying that,
Sometimes living, sometimes dying."

"A lamp!" said the sacristan, laughing.

"You're no good!" protested Maricruz.

At that moment Florinda asked her quietly:

"How is it you didn't go to the wake?"

"Young girls never go to the wake of an old woman," she replied. "My mother went."

The allusion to her future family brought a flush to her cheeks.

Some of them tried to figure out how old the dead woman was, and Ascensión said she did not know for a certainty because in the church register it stated only that she was born "the day that the boundary lines of Fumiyelamo were decided upon."

"I had not been born yet," announced tío Dolores, very wide awake and with an air of pride.

Tío Rosendín, smiling mischievously, suggested another riddle:

"What thing can it be
That you've never seen, nor can see,
That has neither color nor smell,
But tastes as sweet as the honey of the bee?"

An air of perplexity held the audience in silence. The old man raised a warning finger to a woman of his own age who was about to reply:

"Let the girls guess it!"

"The water!" exclaimed a juvenile voice.

"*Ave Maria!* It must be something you've never seen!"

The interest increased until all tasks were suspended. After a few foolish replies the sacristan said triumphantly:

"A kiss!"

"Mercy!" exclaimed the girls, with reddened cheeks.

They all laughed, and the old man, quite elated, added at once:

"White I was at birth,
Green when but a child,
Red when in my youth,
Black when old and mild."

"A blackberry! A blackberry!" the girls repeated gayly. Then, thinking that tía Gertrudis was rested by now, they again demanded the promised story.

While the old woman was concentrating her mind, the wind could be heard moaning outside, while within the stable the spinning wheels hummed and buzzed. An occasional sigh would greet the white bundles of cotton in the hands of the spinners.

"It happened," began the story-teller, "one very

gloomy night, now centuries ago. On the sea that they call the Sea of Death, not far from La Coruña, a boat was sailing under the command of the Turk most feared in all the histories of pirates. He had with him as a captive a poor maiden whom the captain had stolen from a lordly castle. She was the daughter of a man of great distinction, and was as beautiful and fine as threads of gold. The Turk wanted to hide the maiden somewhere on the shore, and was waiting for a signal, the light from one of his pirates who was looking for a cave or the lair of some wild beast; but across all that expanse of sea came not a single light. So the vessel, with flapping sails, was moving along slowly, in a dying wind. The sailors were all tired out. Suddenly he saw a light in a tower called the Tower of the Mirror, which was lighted on dark nights for the ships that hove in sight with peaceful intent. The pirate leaped to his feet with the girl in his arms, thinking the light of the lantern a signal from his men. The unhappy maiden called upon her God, the God of the Christians, asking Him to save her from that terrible danger——"

Tía Gertrudis paused in order to recall the stirring words of the captive, and although the same legend had been heard at bees innumerable times, a devout silence prevailed throughout the room, and an atmosphere of the sea and of adventure added to her importance and exalted her in the ravished minds of her hearers. The evocation of that other plain, immense and free, unknown and attractive, on which a woman suffered captivity, presented itself on the old woman's lips with appealing imagery; and the

Maragatas could feel beating against their hearts the waves of that distant sea that carried off their fathers, their sons, and their husbands, alluring them by its promising expanse, only to deceive them at last—the illusion of an infinite number of women.

For Florinda, too, the friendly plain of her childhood sounded hoarse and strange in the terrifying descriptions of tía Gertrudis. All the girl's visions had suffered shipwreck upon the beloved shore, and the recollection of what she had lost presented itself before her like a hazy vision of ships fleeing from moaning breakers; the profile of a sailor lad stood out dimly among these recollections as a symbol of her first dream of love. For an instant she was surprised at falling from the cloud of her memories to the depths of the stable where the guests sat waiting for the end of the story. She glanced around in surprise, and it seemed to her that Marinela's face was very colorless, and that Ramona was trying to conceal her uneasiness.

But now the old woman went on with her tale:

"And the cries of the innocent girl struck the sailors on the ship with compassion, and they took pity on her, and began to curse the captain——"

A frightful crash left the legend unfinished, and filled every heart with terror.

"Was it thunder?" stammered a voice.

At the same moment Marinela fell forward against her mother in a swoon.

Ramona caught her with so hoarse a cry that it seemed as if it were a roar emanating from her heart. The girl's inert form slipped to the floor, as Ramona rushed fiercely upon tía Gertrudis and

shook her by the arms in a fierce explosion of frenzy.

"Conjure her, conjure her this very minute!" she demanded, using the familiar thou with scorn, "thou witch of Lucifer!"

"I—I?"

"Thou, thou, sorceress!"

"I don't know how to conjure! I am a Christian woman, and I never had power with Satan."

The senile voice pleaded with less surprise than bitterness; on every face panic stood revealed, and no one but Florinda remembered to loosen Marinela's bodice.

"Bring vinegar for her pulse!" she demanded sharply.

Olalla, rising to her feet with indecision, declared:

"I am afraid to go alone!"

After much vacillation and many consultations, she lighted the end of a taper in the candlestick, and started, accompanied by Maricruz, toward the door leading to the kitchen; but before gaining it she returned in alarm.

"I hear the sound of footsteps!"

"It's only the wind and the thunder," said Maricruz, more courageous.

Florinda urged them to make haste:

"Be quick, be quick!"

Ramona, who had not loosed her hold of tía Gertrudis, suddenly changed her delirious ravings into supplication:

"For God's sake, conjure her for me! For the sake of Our Lady of Purity! I will give you whatever you ask of me; but look, she's going to die! Hurry, for the sake of the Virgin!"

The old woman seemed not to hear her and only murmured tearfully:

"After all these years, when I've never done the slightest harm to anyone, the neighbors are as afraid of me as children are of spooks!"

A pair of nervous arms suddenly lifted her to her feet, and with a single bound Ramona stood her beside the sick girl who was now lying across Florinda's lap.

"Give her the remedy! Apply a talisman!" sobbed the mother on her knees with clasped hands.

"But I don't know anything about sorcery, woman!"

Some one counseled:

"Say something, even if only a prayer."

"Has she got a fistula?"

"We don't know."

Tía Gertrudis drew near and rested her wearied eyes on Marinela's face; it was moist and colorless as if bathed by the last sweat; the application of vinegar to her temples and wrists had been fruitless.

The old woman sighed with compassion and stood silent, in a solemn attitude, for a moment, in order to collect her thoughts, while all waited anxiously. Suddenly she began to recite:

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; three angels were walking down a road; they met with Our Lord Jesus Christ. 'Whither go ye, three angels?' He said. 'We are going to Mount Olivet to seek herbs and unguents to cure our sorrows and afflictions.' And the three angels went on their way. 'Come this way, I say; covenants and homages ye do me to-day; and in

reward for these words ye will take away nothing except olive oil and greasy wool of live sheep—plague or wound, whate'er ye be, get ye gone, I conjure thee; that ye neither fester nor pester, neither by water nor by wind, nor by any other bad weather, for neither did the lance thrust that Longinus gave Our Lord Jesus Christ fester nor pester——"

Marinela opened her eyes which were as filled with amazement and regret as if they were already touched by death. The impression of a miracle held the people in the room motionless, and Ramona, hesitating feverishly between odium and gratitude, demanded of the old woman:

"Is she delivered now?"

"Of what?"

"Of the devil."

"Don't fool yourself, woman! You must be crazy! I said the prayer because it is one that is blessed, and it is good for curing the sick if God receives it. Now you must take the girl up very carefully; put her to bed and keep her warm, and give her a hot drink. Do you hear?"

Under the gentle hands of Florinda, Marinela began to recover warmth and her senses.

The sick girl's couch still stood in the center of the sala. Her nurse shared it with her; she had given up trying to follow the doctor's orders, as she found them impossible to fulfill.

Mariflor no longer had the energy to carry on the struggle against poverty and ignorance that continued day after day; but after she had calmed the

fears of the family she again took up the task of nursing her cousin.

After the storm had ceased she opened the doors leading to the balcony in order to enjoy the clearness of the night; the moon, low and cold, its light reflected against the snow, illuminated Valdecruces with a fantastic glow.

"Water!" pleaded Marinela eagerly, and then, placing her hands against her throat, she complained:

"I have something like a lump here!"

In her nervous condition she began to rave about the convent; she could hear the trickling of the water in the cloister garden, and the penetrating fragrance of the flowers made her dizzy.

"Don't you want one of these blossoms?" she murmured. "They are for the Virgin, but I'll give you this purple one. Do you hear the canticles? They are so sweet! Listen:

> "I am a woman, small and weak.
> As a dowry I was given
> The sweet and grievous burden
> Of an immense heart.

"That's the voice of Mother Rosario!—— I'm afraid of the moon.—— Look what a face it's making!—— Come, we must sing praises to God, too; sing with me!"

And with snatches from different songs she composed a very strange one, the chorus of which she persisted in repeating:

"I am a woman, small and weak."

The excited voice of the singer resounded with

indescribable sadness throughout the room, and Mariflor, abandoning herself to recollections and to sorrows, managed to persuade her that this song was not a religious one.

"Don't you remember that we first heard it sung by that strolling player?"

"Oh, yes, yes; a girl who had a broken heart, just as I have. Come here—listen!"

And winding her arms about Florinda's neck, Marinela asked:

"Have you any verses hidden away anywhere?"

"No, child, I haven't a single one."

"Then listen to my secret: I have a heart—but I don't mean to tell that to you; I'm telling it to God, to Him!"

The child turned toward the cross hanging on the wall bearing the sorrowing image of the Lord, and began to pray; but her obsessed mind could succeed only in giving form to the doleful ditties she had heard sung by the actress; and when a glimmer of lucidity threw its light upon her nonsensical prayers, Marinela, accusing herself of being a heretic, finally began to weep, with her face turned directly toward the cross.

The sacred effigy, the cause of that struggle, also attracted the glances of Florinda, which with strong emotions of piety had been fluctuating between human sorrow and divine love. Closing her eyes in order the better to contemplate her disturbed conscience, she imagined that her breast was about to swell again with tears as in the days when her sorrow had assumed the form of compassion and tenderness; she thought to join her weeping with that of

the sick girl, and it seemed to her that she could feel rising in her soul the infinite power of sacrifice, holy and pure, now free of egoistic intent, in humble imitation of the sacrifice made by the dying Jesus.

But when a moan recalled her to herself, she found her lashes dry and her thoughts rebellious; no doubt she had been dreaming.

Marinela, delirious again, mused:

"Look at that shooting star! Look what a long flight that star took! See if the sky is on fire! The plain is all a sea of snow."

Now she was frightened by a cat that was yowling, and again by the striking of the clock. At daybreak a disconsolate dog caused her to scream with terror, a dog that was howling desperately.

Florinda, too, was startled by the lugubrious howl, but she would not reveal her alarm; she threw all her powers of persuasion into her tranquillizing words, and at last succeeded in making the girl fall asleep.

Then, sitting beside the window wrapped in a shawl, she became motionless from cold and weariness; again giving herself up to discouraged meditation, she closed her eyes. Now gray winter was upon them with its threat of sorrows; the wolves were at the door; the home was poverty-stricken; a father and a daughter were ill; the roads were closed; hopes were dead.

Gradually Mariflor's head sank lower and lower until it bent over her breast as if vanquished, and then leaned back against the windowpanes. She could hear the sound of weeping; her grandmother

was weeping bitterly, and so were her cousin and the children; a voice, sad and obscure, rang out also half in sorrow, half in fury. Mariflor wished to gain her feet to learn the reason for the weeping, but she was restrained by the wind of a storm that was blowing from a dismal cloud. Was the snow accompanied by a hurricane? Ah, no! This wind and this shadow were the fluttering folds of the mantle of a priest. Don Miguel was coming in, deeply agitated. "Do you hear the sound of weeping?" he asked. "Won't you be the comforter for all these tears? Tell me! Won't you?" She was about to answer and, like Marinela a few moments before in her delirium, she could only manage to stammer the verses she had learned from the actress:

> "In this heart, all lonely spaces,
> And forests and deserts,
> Has been born a great, tremendous love——"

Fortunately the incoherent reply was stifled by a succession of resounding howls that awoke Florinda.

"That dog again!" she murmured anxiously; and, still dominated by the recent nightmare, she raised her hands to her face and found that it was wet; had she been weeping?

The whiteness of the landscape attracted her weary eyes, and instantly they overclouded with pity: the whole flock of doves, hungry and disconsolate, stood waiting on the gallery, and as they saw Florinda's face, they began a low deep cooing, in tones as humble as that of a child when pleading for alms through the love of God.

For almost two months Don Miguel had been carrying a letter from Rogelio Terán in his pocket. Each morning he would say to himself: "I will show it to Mariflor to-day." And then he would feel an immense pity for that mute hope that would sometimes resurge in the girl's eyes.

Of late the poor girl had seemed to change greatly. Aside from the gloomy fire in her pupils and an occasional profound glow of enthusiasm that would overcome her at unexpected moments, a profound dejection oppressed her, and a weariness filled with tragic restlessness urged her on to fatalism.

Upon seeing her becoming engulfed in misfortune, the priest doubted whether the reading of the cruel letter would prove to be a saving cable flung by deception to the final energies of the unhappy girl, or a crushing blow that would break them beyond all hope of recovery.

Once again Don Miguel was attacked by this doubt as he was making his way to the house of tía Dolores. He had just been told that Marinela had suffered a serious fainting spell the evening before, and although the details of the event scandalized him not a little, he was coming to offer what consolation he might to these people in their trouble.

On the porch he met Olalla, who told him:

"I am going after the doctor."

"Is Marinela so ill that you must venture out in such weather as this?"

"It is less stormy to-day than it was yesterday."

"But the roads are all drifted over."

"I'll find my way by following along the border of the ditch."

"Wait a few minutes at least until I go up and see her, and if necessary we will find some one to go with you."

Ramona appeared, and under the severe glance of the priest she lowered her own eyes, with a flush of shame.

"So," said Don Miguel, "it is impossible to cure you of superstition? I did not expect that of you!"

Making no effort to defend herself, she began to tremble and to tell the news from America: her husband was coming home in a dying condition, and her son was leaving at once.

"In the meantime," she added, sobbing bitterly, "the girl is getting worse every day; and I've left my wits I don't know where."

"May God comfort you!" sympathized the curate.

They all followed him upstairs while Ramona continued talking:

"Last night the poor child wouldn't have any one near her except her cousin, and all we could do was to go to bed. I came in at daybreak and found them both asleep; I didn't make the least bit of noise to awaken them."

"Well, you had better look in now and see if they are still asleep."

The woman cautiously opened the door and peeped into the little sala, returning instantly and making a negative gesture.

"Come in, come in!"

Don Miguel found Marinela with her feverish eyes fastened upon the crucifix, and Florinda with

hers turned toward the gallery. They were both startled upon hearing footsteps in the room, and then after greeting the priest, Marinela, discovering the doves, exclaimed:

"Look at them, look at them out there! The poor little things can't find a bite to eat; go get a few handfuls of feed to scatter on the floor here."

The children hastened to obey, and Florinda, obsessed by a strange emotion, dried her eyes, murmuring:

"The frost on the windowpanes moistened my face. I fell asleep, and I think I must have been dreaming."

"Something sad?" asked the priest, struck by the deep meaning of the words.

"Sad? It was something tremendous! You had come to ask me—— Oh, I don't remember now just what!" she stammered faintly.

Suddenly Don Miguel, with the precipitation of one who is doing something against his will, felt in his pocket for a letter and handed it to Florinda.

"Read this; I received it some time ago."

"Is it from her father?" asked Ramona.

"No."

An involuntary silence fell, and although the priest made an effort to speak, while, with trembling hands, Florinda was unfolding the sheet, he succeeded only in starting tía Dolores off on a litany apropos of her returning son:

"Oh me; oh my! If only I could take him into my arms in just the twinkling of an eye! Will he be here by Christmas? Does it snow on the seas, too? I'm going to give him my own bed, sir, and

the warmest blankets. By the time the leaves begin to come out in the spring he'll begin to get better; don't you think so?"

The sun had risen, pale and cold. Marinela, lying on the edge of the bed, drew toward it as if asking for an alms of comfort: in reality what she wanted was to get close to Mariflor, in whose hands trembled Rogelio's letter.

Standing in the focus of the light, the girl read:

"Miguel, my friend; it is not the poet or the comrade, but the penitent, who makes this appeal to you. Forgive me as best you may; if your indignation scourges me, may your piety in the end absolve me. I contritely confess to you my sin of inconstancy, my useless eagerness for emotions, for tenderness, and for change. This sorrowful circumstance pains me deeply enough; of all my crimes, I myself am not only the criminal, but the chief victim. You know the human heart thoroughly; and, even better, you know my own disposition, wherein dwells every manner of weakness. I had fervently longed to make Mariflor happy, without understanding that never, never, will I achieve happiness, either for myself, or for any one else. Fantasy deceived me; I now realize the pettiness of my spirit which, enamored of dreams, cowardly surrenders when it comes to face realities. Forgive my error, you who are so sure of yourself, so upright, so heroic. Pardon also the delay of these lines, which my hand writes you long after they have been dictated by my conscience. I struggled before writing them; I hesitated and suffered many times with my pen actually touching the paper; you will

believe it. Also, I lack the courage to write it to her; tell her to forgive me; that perhaps I will never forget her; that if I were to go to seek her, no doubt I would be more guilty than I seem to be in her eyes now, appearing as an ingrate and a deceiver. Tell her——"

"Is it written in verse?" asked Marinela, impatient at the prolongation of the reading.

Mariflor turned her face, white as a lily. The children crowded close to her, and Olalla, too, was approaching. The two women at the lower end of the room sat with their arms crossed over their breasts. Now the sick girl had taken in her hands the grain for the doves. She complained of the soreness in her throat, and again asked:

"Is it written in verse? Tell me!"

"No. It is written in prose!"

The reply rung out strong and gloomily. A portion of the sheet of paper still remained unread, but the reader raised her eyes as if awaking from a dream, passed a hand across her brow, folded the letter, and handing it to the curate, said:

"You may write my father that I will marry Antonio."

Her voice was firm; firm also her manner. A suggestion of tragedy, of tragedy devoid of sobs or words, swept through the room and filled every breast with sudden amazement. After a painful silence, the priest with an air of grave solemnity, asked:

"Daughter, have you thought it over well?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, her manner haughty, and her glance calm. "And you will be so kind as to

give my cousin, in my name, the 'yes' for which he is waiting."

She said no more. She turned toward the balcony to open the windows; took the rye in her apron, and the whole flock of doves came flying in to satiate themselves from her friendly lap, surrounding her slender figure with a gentle murmur of cooing voices and flapping wings. The light of the sun, grown stronger as the morning advanced, brushed away the mists and feigned a smile on the harsh features of the steppe.

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